

Wesley the Would-be Wizard

Wesley really wanted to be a wizard. Just a wizard. Not a super wizard, just a plain, no-bells-or-whistles wizard. He already had the makings of a good wizard, being from good wizard stock from way back. But Wesley's skills were what his mum described as 'latent' and his dad described as 'emerging'. What they really meant was that he had to practise his spells daily, concentrating really hard, learning them off-by-heart and only then would he be able to train as a wizard. And that was pretty boring.

It was also pretty difficult because Wesley's older brother Wilbur and his younger sister Wynona were *wonder* wizards. And they didn't even need to practise. His mum said they were 'naturally gifted' and his dad said they were 'talented to their bones'. It was so unfair.

Wilbur was the youngest wizard to be accepted into the Wizard Academy. Wynona was the first girl to be accepted into the town's Wizard Academy. In fact, she was the only girl and she was very fond of reminding Wesley just that.

"I bet I'll be the only girl ever to be accepted into the Wizard Academy, Wesley," she would say, twirling her purple glittery wand.

Wilbur was equally fond of reminding Wesley about his own pretty incredible achievement.

"You know, Wesley, by the time I was *your* age, I'd already been at the Academy two years." He would whip his golden wand sharply round in an S shape and make Wesley glow bright green, just for the fun of it.

It was dinnertime at the Wilders house and that always proved a little tricky. Literally.

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“Wilbur, what have you done with the spaghetti?” Dad asked, his eyebrows rising slightly above his kindly eyes.

“Nothing,” Wilbur said, but in his ‘when I say nothing, I mean I’ve done something so tricky that you’ll never guess what’ voice.

“Wilbur,” Mum said, “the spaghetti was on the table. I was about to grate the parmesan cheese over it. How can I do that if it’s not here anymore?”

Wesley’s stomach growled. “Wilbur, please bring it back. I’m hungry,” he said.

A single strand of spaghetti dropped into the bowl. “There you are, Wesley,” Wilbur said with a great big smile plastered over his face.

Wilbur could be so annoying sometimes. Dad’s face was getting darker; Mum was rolling her lips together. Wynona was just about ready to scream, and nobody wanted to hear that.

What was it that Dad always said? *Sometimes you have to take the bull by the horns.*

“Well, bull, here I come,” Wesley muttered under his breath. He took a huge lungful of air and shouted his spell.

Ibbly wibbly spangly pow

Make Wilbur return the spaghetti right now

The spaghetti fell in a clump all over Wesley’s head. As he pulled the strands aside, he clapped eyes on Wilbur’s beaming face.

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“I’ll bet that Aggie Mellon will love you with your new hair-do,” Wilbur grinned.

Every year, the Wizard Academy held an open day where there was an entry competition. The three sub-principals of the Academy watched as each would-be wizard cast their spells. The one who performed the most spectacular, innovative or socially-minded spell was entered into the Academy.

This year would be Wesley’s second attempt. Mum said he was ‘bound to be lucky sooner or later’; Dad said ‘the proof of the pudding would be in the tasting’. Well, luck would have nothing to do with it, and what pudding had to do with anything was beyond Wesley.

Wesley needed to be accepted into the Wizard Academy soon because otherwise he would be stuck in the Training Nursery forever and that would be so not cool.

Sitting in front of the Wizard Academy, Wesley and his shaggy white dog Scout admired the huge tree that just outside the main hall. It was dry and gnarled and looked likely to crumble to dust at any time.

Legend was that many many years ago, Eldred Penbootle, the principal wizard of the town had turned himself into a tree to avoid capture by his arch enemy, Sefton the Selfish.

The townspeople banished Sefton, but unfortunately, none of them possessed enough magic skills to undo Penbootle’s own spell.

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Penbootle's son grew to be a skilled wizard and built the Wizard Academy as a testament to his father (who grew taller each year). Eventually, the tree was named the Principal Tree.

In the last few years as the hot seasons became more intense, the townspeople were worried about the tree. If Penbootle was to be freed from his own spell, the Principal Tree had to be kept alive and no amount of watering seemed to make it any healthier.

Wesley patted Scout. "I'm going to get in this year, Scout. And then I can try to reverse the curse of Penbootle. I won't stuff it up this year."

Scout blinked.

"You're right," Wesley said. "It was a disaster last time."

On that occasion, Wesley's spell was to give the town litter collectors a helping hand – literally. He'd taken up his position in front of the sub-principals and enunciated the words of the spell, clearly and loudly just like his parents had taught him.

Ibbly wibbly idey fidey

Extra arms to keep the town tidy

Unfortunately, although he'd practised the spell on Scout, who had indeed grown extra arms (and looked very funny with them too), there had been what his mum had later termed 'a minor oversight' and what his dad had suggested was 'a mere blip'. Wesley had forgotten to invite any of the town's litter collectors to the competition. Instead, he'd given the sub-principals a set of extra arms each.

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Spectacular? Yes. Innovative and socially-minded? Perhaps not.

Wesley returned to his garden without the inspiration he had hoped to receive by kneeling at the Principal Tree. He sat on the step and rested his head in his hands when he heard Wynona's voice. No doubt she was putting the final touches to a new spell that would benefit the whole town - making the water in the lake sparkly or the roses smell more perfumed.

Wesley sighed, not just at his sister's benevolence, but at his own lack of inspiration for a winning spell. He couldn't bear the thought of missing out on the Wizard Academy. Scout nuzzled against his ear, tickling him. Wesley began to giggle and Scout gave him a great bit wet lick on the cheek. When Wesley opened his eyes to give her a hug back, he saw Aggie Mellon's face on Scout's body and screamed.

"Wesley loves Aggie, Wesley loves Aggie!" Wynona crooned from the window.

After school, Wesley went to the park to kick a ball with Scout. In the distance Wesley could see Aggie. Should he risk talking to her or would he turn crimson and stutter as usual? Aggie waved to him but his arm got stuck by his side.

"Hi Wesley, what are you doing for the judges this year?"

Wesley swallowed hard but the words butted against his teeth.

"Hhpagn htiahgfrac," he said.

Scout tipped her head to one side.

"Umm, what?" Aggie asked.

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Wesley coughed. "I'm still working on it," he managed to say.

"I'm trying to learn a spell to make golden water for the town during the hot season. I'm hoping it will keep the Principal Tree alive," she said.

Aggie looked at Wesley and smiled. Scout looked at Wesley and yipped. The burning in his cheeks increased a notch. "That's ambitious."

Next to Aggie's ambitious and socially-minded spell, Wesley felt his own trick was dull. Scout wriggled closer to him, licking her chops, and nudging him.

"My spell is to try to make my dog talk. She already does, don't you Scout? Say something, girl." She panted. Wesley slung his hands deep into his pockets as Aggie watched the dog expectantly. He sighed as his cheeks burned some more. "I'm still working on it."

"She's cute," Aggie said, smiling at him. "Good luck with your spell."

When Scout sat in front of him silently staring at the wand, Wesley knew that even with all the practice in the world, his spell just was not going to work. Even if he could make Scout talk, the spell was neither socially-minded or innovative.

His dad came out into the yard. "Not going so well, son?" Mr Wilder asked, sitting next to his son.

"I just don't think I've got what it takes to be a wizard, Dad."

"Nonsense. You just need to believe."

"But Wilbur and Wynona breezed it. And you went to the Academy too, and your father. I'm a failure." He'd been thinking it for a while, but to actually say it, took a deal of effort.

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“Perhaps I should let you in on a little secret, son,” Mr Wilder said, sitting down next to Wesley and stretching his legs out in front of him. “Before I was successful in entering the Academy, I managed to turn my father into a bee. I was trying to turn the blowflies into bees so that we could get more honey, but your grandfather walked out into the yard just at the wrong time. He buzzed around the yard collecting nectar. I tried everything I could to undo the spell, but I’d lost belief in myself and my capabilities.

“I didn’t know at the time but whilst he was a bee he was willing me to find a way out. He had decided he would prefer to remain a bee as long as it took for me to undo the spell, rather than me call for help.”

Wesley tried to imagine his grandfather as a bee. It wasn’t difficult. He was short and round and had a penchant for stripy jumpers. “What happened?”

“I’d given up. I was about to go and look for one of the sub-principal wizards, when he stung me. It shocked me so much that I remembered my undo spell without even thinking about it.” Mr Wilder stood up and patted Wesley on the head. “You’ll find a spell to do, and if you don’t manage to get into the Academy, you’ll carry on at the training nursery learning lots of other things that are just as useful. We’ll still be proud of you.”

It was the day before the competition and by now Scout could stand on her back legs and walk, she could balance on her front legs in a kind of handstand. She could roll over and play dead for so long that you almost forgot that she was pretending. She was a pretty smart dog, but as for talking, well, her vocabulary remained at ‘yip’ and ‘nop’

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Wilbur took every opportunity to rub Wesley's failure in his face.

"Never mind, little brother. I'm sure if you tried harder Scout would be able to recite the National Anthem backwards."

Wynona wasn't quite so cruel in her taunting. She merely reminded Wesley that on open day, Aggie Mellon would be there to witness his epic fail too.

"Come on, Scout. Please talk. All my magic willpower is used up." He slumped down and held his head in his hands.

He didn't notice Aggie Mellon behind him and he jumped at the sound of her voice. "How are you going, Wesley?"

Wesley shrugged as Scout ran to sit in front of Aggie. "I've given up. I don't think I'll enter the competition. My spell is no good."

Aggie pulled a sad face. "Oh, that's a shame. I was hoping we could go together. I'm a bit nervous. My spell doesn't always work. Yesterday, I managed to dry up our dam. And the day before, I managed to turn all of our light fittings into water spouts." She turned a pinky-red and burst into a fluttery laugh. Wesley laughed too.

"It's nice to know I'm not the only one who gets their spells muddled up," he said. "Do you want to practise now? I was going to the Principal Tree to see if I can get some more inspiration."

Aggie stood with her pink wand in her hand and took three deep breaths. She turned to face the tree and slowly recited her spell.

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Ibbly wibbly quarter shorter

Give me golden spell-breaking water

Wesley took deep breaths too and prepared his spell.

Ibbly wibbly porky cork

Give my dog the power to talk

Just as Aggie and Wesley lowered their wands, Scout ran around their feet and the tips of their wands touched her shaggy ears.

“Yip!” she barked and ran towards the Principal Tree. She sniffed around its base this way and that.

“What’s she doing?” Aggie asked.

“It looks like she wants to have a wee,” Wesley said.

He was astonished when she cocked her leg up against the Principal Tree.

“I thought she was a girl,” Aggie giggled.

“She is,” Wesley said, scratching his head. “Not there Scout. No!”

Too late. She weed up the trunk. Wilbur and Wynona happened to arrive just as Wesley and Aggie were trying to retrieve Scout.

“What’s going on?” Wilbur asked with a smirk.

“Why is Scout weeing on the tree?” Wynona said. “And why is she doing it like a boy dog?”

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Aggie and Wesley stood still, red-faced and silent. Scout finished her business and went to Wilbur and Wynona, sitting in front of them. She opened her mouth.

“Yes, Scout. We know you can say yip!” Wilbur said, patting the dog.

Instead, Scout said, “And that was the spell-breaker, believe or not. I’ve been trying to tell you all along.”

The four of them gaped at Scout as she carried on. “You had to touch me when I said Yip and I had to be near the tree. But anyway. You watch. Penbootle will be with us in a few minutes. See how the bark is softening? Oh, and close your mouths, all of you. You look like me when I’ve seen a cat.”

By now, all of the townspeople had come to witness Eldred’s reappearance. He brushed himself down and walked towards the astonished crowd.

“Wesley Wilder. Come to me at once.” His face was beaming. Wilbur and Wynona could only watch as their little brother stood next to Penbootle receiving mighty congratulations from all the people in the town.

“So, he’ll be with us next year, at the Academy,” Wilbur said.

“I guess so, but he’s worked hard for it,” Wynona replied.

“And you should both be proud of him,” Scout added.

They both looked at her, shaking their heads, before running over to Wesley to give him a big hug and officially welcome him to the Academy.