

Robert giggled behind his red beard. Belinda popped her gum and **smirked**. She stood with her hands on her hips.

60 “What? What did you say?” Mrs. Bunnin asked, pulling off her glasses. “Are you chewing gum, Belinda?”

“No, Mrs. Bunnin,” Belinda lied. “I just forgot my lines.” **C**

Belinda turned to face the snowflake boys clumped together in the back. She rolled out her tongue, on which rested a ball of gray gum, depleted of sweetness under her **relentless** chomp. She whispered “sucka” and giggled so that her nose quivered dark shadows.

The play, *The Last Stand*, was about the Donner party just before they got hungry and started eating each other. Everyone who scored at least twelve out of fifteen on their spelling tests got to say at least one line.

70 Everyone else had to stand and be trees or snowflakes.

Mrs. Bunnin wanted the play to be a success. She couldn’t risk having kids with bad memories on stage. The nonspeaking trees and snowflakes stood humming snow flurries, blistering wind, and hail, which they produced by clacking their teeth.

Robert’s mother was proud of him because he was living up to the legend of Robert De Niro, for whom he was named. Over dinner he said, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see,” when his brother asked him to pass the dishtowel, their communal napkin. His sister said, “It’s your turn to do dishes,” and he said, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see.” His dog, Queenie,  
80 begged him for more than water and a dog biscuit. He touched his dog’s own hairy beard and said, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see.”

**O**ne warm spring night, Robert lay on his back in the backyard, counting shooting stars. He was up to three when David, a friend who was really his brother’s friend, hopped the fence and asked, “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I can see,” Robert answered. He sat up, feeling good because the line came naturally, without much thought. He leaned back on his elbow and asked David what he wanted to be when he grew up. **D**

90 “I don’t know yet,” David said, plucking at the grass. “Maybe a fighter pilot. What do you want to be?”

“I want to guard the president. I could wrestle the assassins and be on television. But I’d pin those dudes, and people would say, ‘That’s him, our hero.’” David plucked at a stalk of grass and thought deeply.

Robert thought of telling David that he really wanted to be someone with a supergreat memory, who could recall facts that most people thought were unimportant. He didn’t know if there was such a job, but he thought it would be great to sit at home by the telephone waiting for scientists to call him and ask hard questions.

**smirk** (smûrk) v. to smile in an insulting way

**C MONITOR**

What is the actual line Belinda is supposed to say?

**relentless** (rĭ-lĕnt’lĭs) *adj.* refusing to stop or give up

**D MONITOR**

Reread lines 75–88. Why does Robert respond with his line when someone speaks to him at home?