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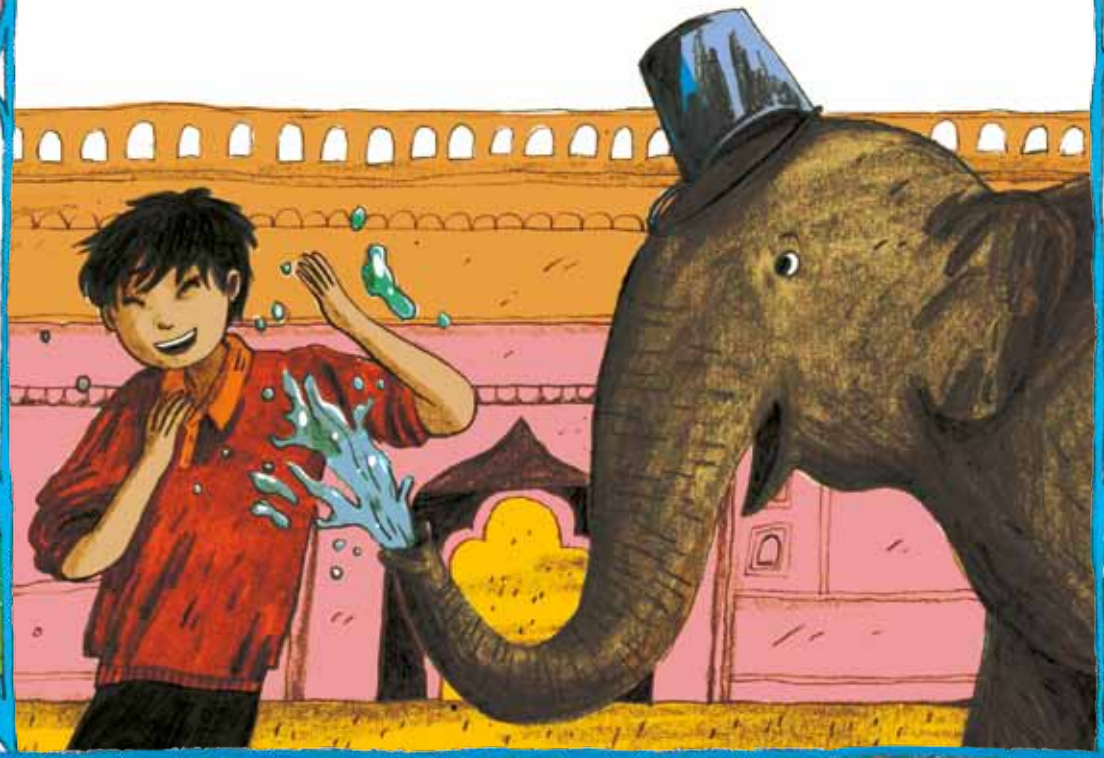
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THE ELEPHANT CARNIVAL

KATE PERIDOT
ILLUSTRATED BY BRIONY MAY SMITH



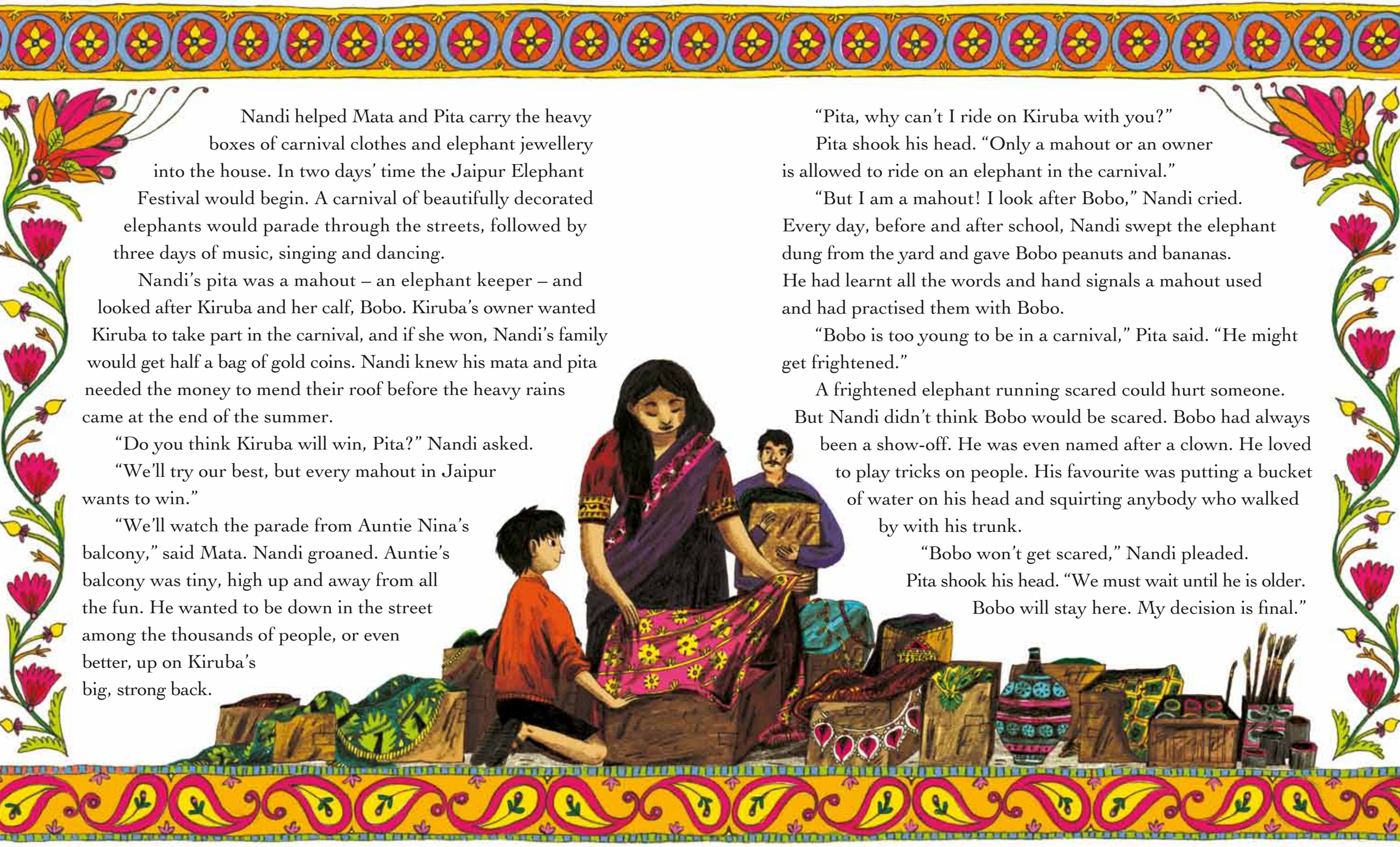
Nandi helped Mata and Pita carry the heavy boxes of carnival clothes and elephant jewellery into the house. In two days' time the Jaipur Elephant Festival would begin. A carnival of beautifully decorated elephants would parade through the streets, followed by three days of music, singing and dancing.

Nandi's pita was a mahout – an elephant keeper – and looked after Kiruba and her calf, Bobo. Kiruba's owner wanted Kiruba to take part in the carnival, and if she won, Nandi's family would get half a bag of gold coins. Nandi knew his mata and pita needed the money to mend their roof before the heavy rains came at the end of the summer.

"Do you think Kiruba will win, Pita?" Nandi asked.

"We'll try our best, but every mahout in Jaipur wants to win."

"We'll watch the parade from Auntie Nina's balcony," said Mata. Nandi groaned. Auntie's balcony was tiny, high up and away from all the fun. He wanted to be down in the street among the thousands of people, or even better, up on Kiruba's big, strong back.



"Pita, why can't I ride on Kiruba with you?"

Pita shook his head. "Only a mahout or an owner is allowed to ride on an elephant in the carnival."

"But I am a mahout! I look after Bobo," Nandi cried. Every day, before and after school, Nandi swept the elephant dung from the yard and gave Bobo peanuts and bananas. He had learnt all the words and hand signals a mahout used and had practised them with Bobo.

"Bobo is too young to be in a carnival," Pita said. "He might get frightened."

A frightened elephant running scared could hurt someone. But Nandi didn't think Bobo would be scared. Bobo had always been a show-off. He was even named after a clown. He loved to play tricks on people. His favourite was putting a bucket of water on his head and squirting anybody who walked by with his trunk.

"Bobo won't get scared," Nandi pleaded.

Pita shook his head. "We must wait until he is older. Bobo will stay here. My decision is final."

Nandi sighed and went over to Bobo, who was resting in the shade of the banyan tree with Kiruba. His head hung low and his trunk was on the ground. Nandi thought Bobo understood a lot of human words. He looked as if he had understood every word Pita had said.

"I know, Bobo. It's not fair," Nandi said, patting him. He pressed his face into Bobo's neck.

Bobo curled his trunk around Nandi's waist and squeezed him affectionately.

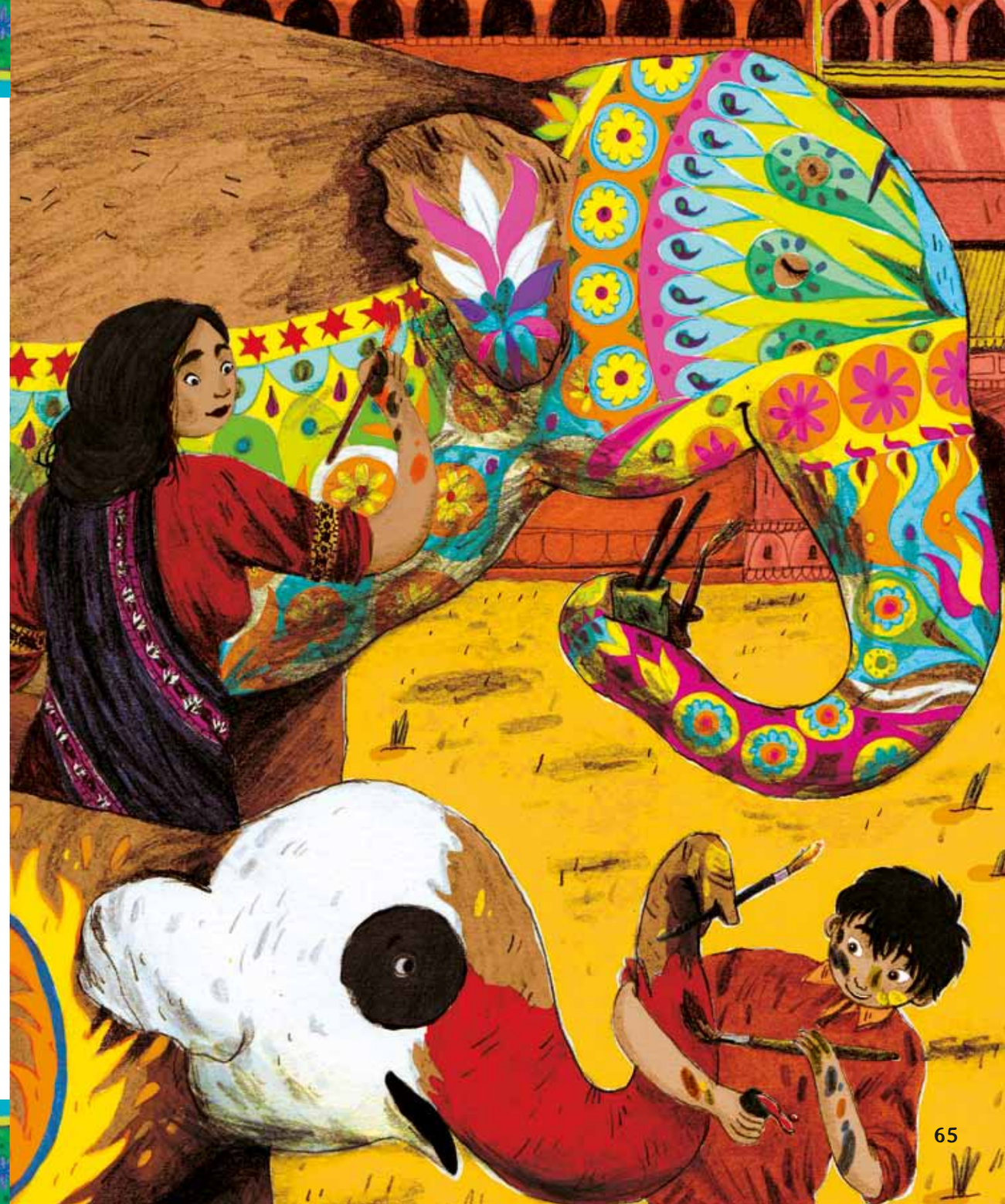
"Come on, the river will cheer us up," Nandi said. "Let's have a mud bath." Bobo trumpeted excitedly. For a while, they splashed and swam and forgot about the carnival.

Early on the day of the carnival, Mata prepared colourful paints to decorate Kiruba. She stood still and proud as Mata painted ornate flowers onto her grey hide.

"Can I paint Bobo?" Nandi said. "Then he won't feel so left out."

Mata smiled. "Use up what paint is left. He'll have to stand very still."

Nandi painted Bobo's trunk red, his face white and made huge black circles around Bobo's eyes. He painted juggling balls on his legs and flaming hoops on his back and even found an old red sunhat to put on Bobo's head. "You really are a clown elephant now," laughed Nandi.



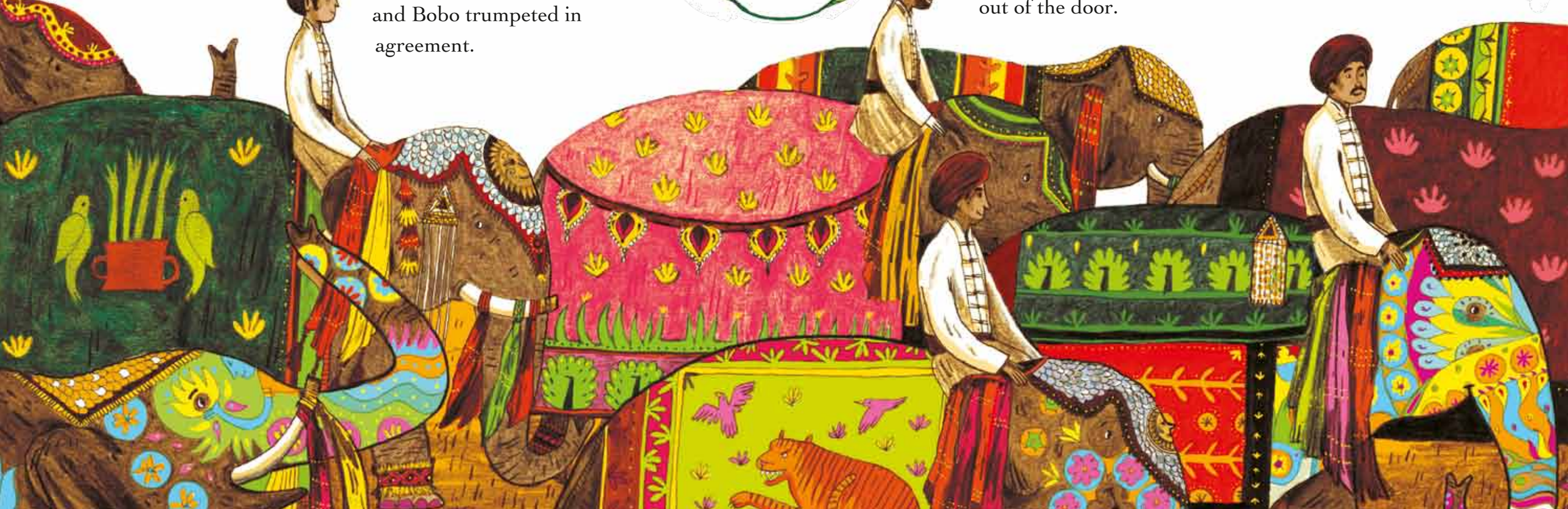
Pita came out of the house dressed in a smart white suit and a red turban. He placed a beautiful red silk cloth, embroidered with golden thread and jewels, over Kiruba's back. Mata looped gold bracelets with tiny bells around Kiruba's ankles and placed a triangle of gold cloth, set with tiny mirrors and glittering stones, on the elephant's head.

"Kiruba, you look beautiful," Nandi gasped and Bobo trumpeted in agreement.

Nandi and Mata waved goodbye and shouted good luck as the elephant and her mahout set off for the town square, where the judging would take place.

"Quick, wash the paint off your hands and get dressed! We don't want to miss the announcement of the winner," said Mata.

Nandi changed into his best clothes and helped his mother put on her best sari. Then they rushed out of the door.



Nandi's heart sank when he saw the other elephants in the square. They were all spectacularly dressed and beautifully painted.

"And the winner is …" cried the judge, "… Avani!"

There was a loud cheer from Avani's owner and his mahout's family.

"We didn't win!" cried Nandi.

Mata took Nandi's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Never mind," she said. "It's the taking part that matters. The carnival is about remembering how blessed we are to have these magnificent animals. It's not just about winning."

The elephants began to move into line, ready for the start of the parade. Nandi waved at Pita and tried to hide his disappointment. He really had thought Kiruba would win.

"Let's go to Auntie's now. It's too hot here," Mata said. They made their way through the crowded streets.

"Bobo!" Nandi suddenly cried. "We were in such a rush, I forgot to attach his chain!"

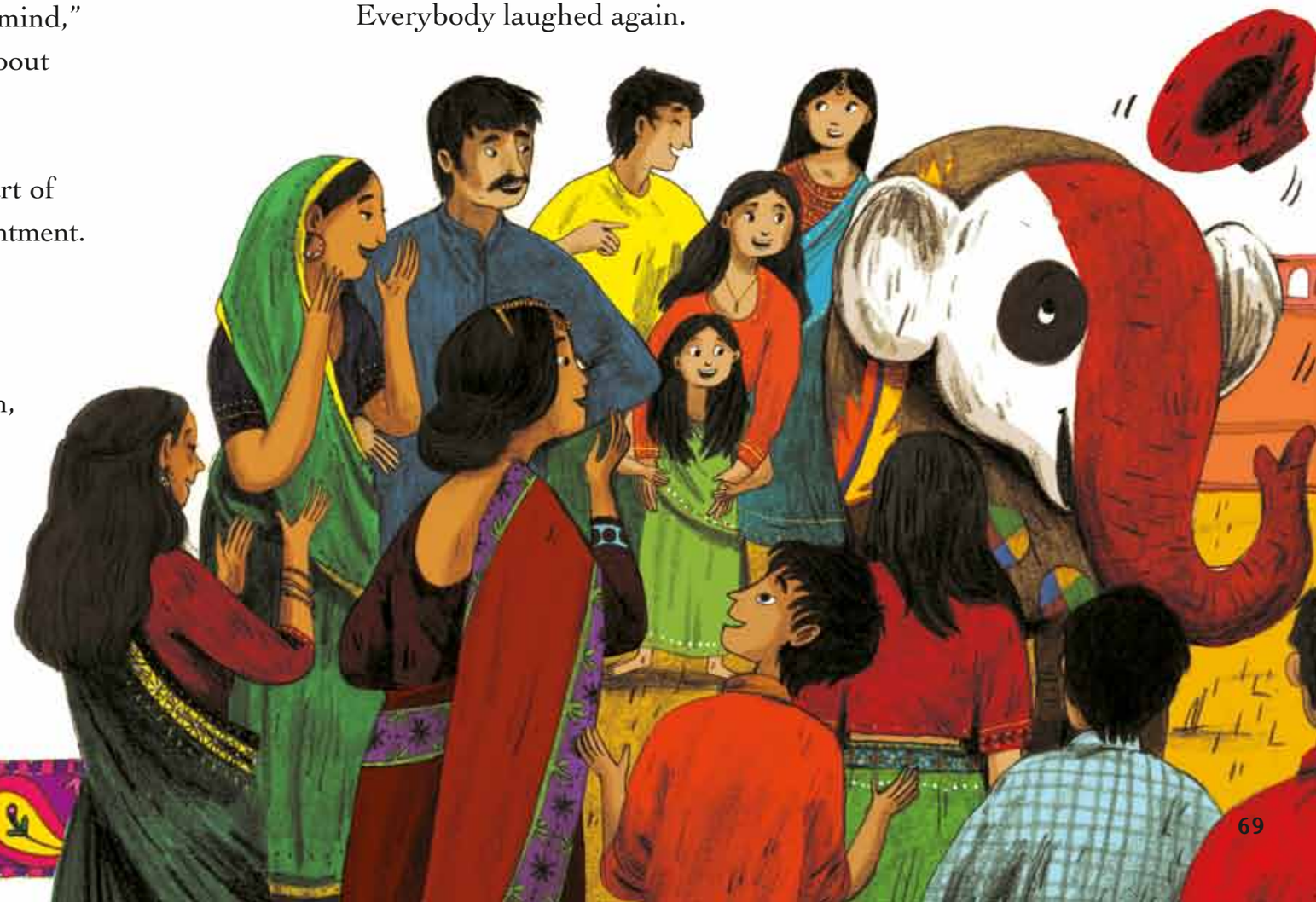
Mata frowned. "We can't leave him loose in the yard. We'll have to go back. Let's hurry or we'll miss the carnival."

As they turned the corner near to home, Nandi and Mata heard laughter. Bobo stood in the middle of the street, surrounded by people. He was tossing his red sunhat into the air and catching it again with his trunk.

Then he turned around and around on the spot, as fast as he could spin. With his painted clown face he did look funny. Nandi and Mata pushed to the front of the crowd.

"Bobo, what are you doing?" Nandi cried.

Bobo was very pleased to see Nandi. He walked over and hugged him with his trunk, lifting Nandi off his feet. Everybody laughed again.



"Is that your elephant?" a man said. "He knows lots of tricks. I hope he's in the carnival parade."

Then they all heard the sound of the parade drums in the distance.

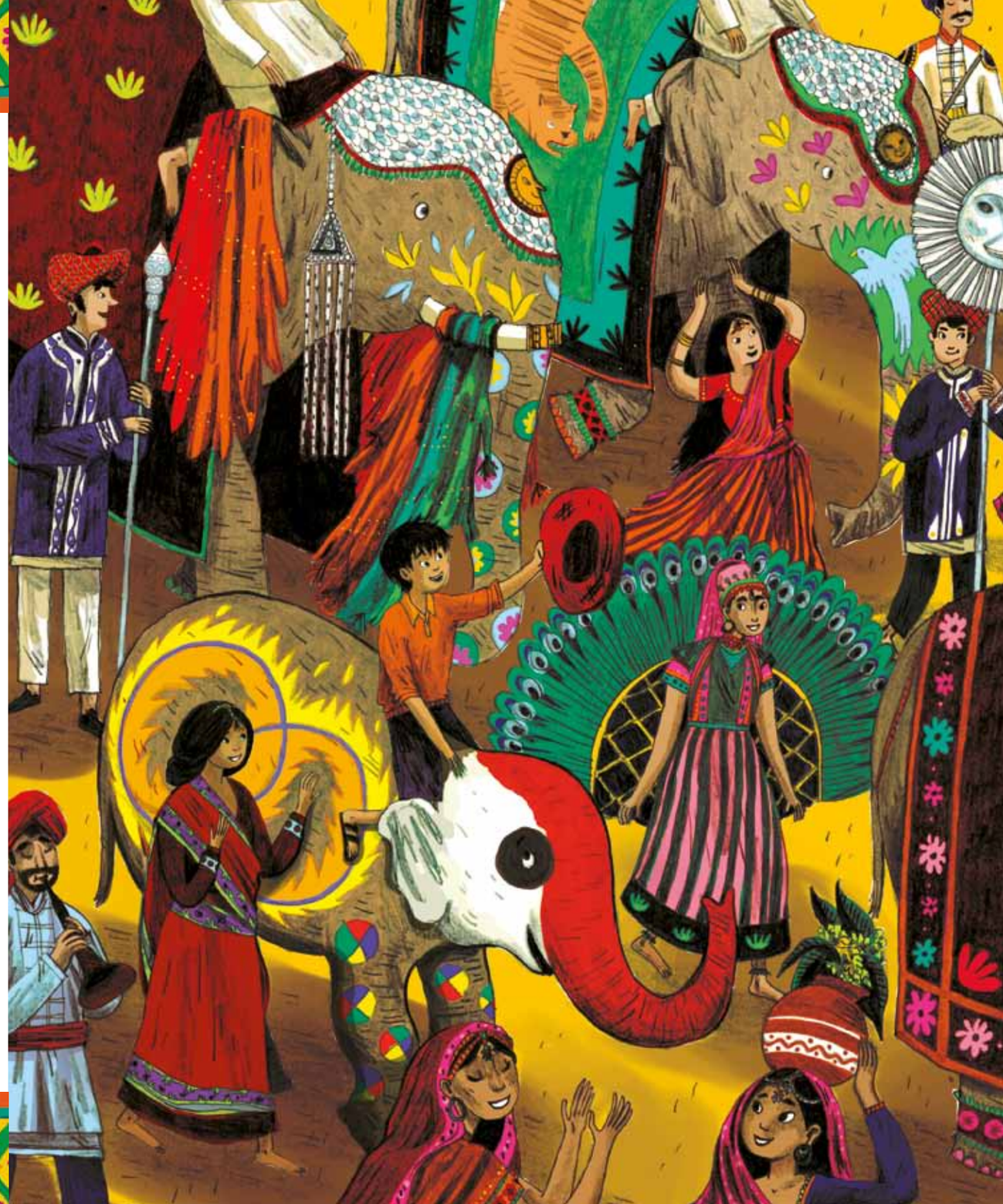
"We're going to miss it," Mata said, worriedly. The street was now full of people hurrying to see the parade.

Bobo bent down on one knee. Nandi knew what he was thinking and jumped onto his back. "Walk beside us, Mata! Everyone will make way for a painted elephant on carnival day."

When the crowds saw Bobo's painted face and funny hat they cheered and made room for them to pass.

Suddenly, they were through the crowd and in the carnival, marching behind the last of the decorated elephants. Behind them were dancers in lion and leopard costumes and a marching band. They were part of the parade! Bobo marched to the beat of the drums, then stopped to twirl and throw his hat. When Nandi caught it, the crowd cheered.

That evening, Nandi had a lot of explaining to do. Pita was cross until he realized that Kiruba and Bobo's owner had been watching the parade. Everyone had asked him who the little clown elephant belonged to. They wanted to see more of Bobo's tricks and have their pictures taken with the funny elephant.



Bobo's owner asked Nandi to put on a weekly show in the town square. When Nandi held out Bobo's red hat at the end of the show, people filled it with coins. Nandi had to give half of the money to Bobo's owner, but Pita got to keep the other half. Soon he had enough to fix the roof. And of course from the day of the carnival onwards, Nandi always made sure Bobo got plenty of his favourite peanuts.

