

# AFTER THE FIRE

BY ADRIENNE FRATER

Joe was first off the bus. He was meeting Mum at the rescue centre, and she'd worry if he was late. He began to run, though not fast because of his asthma. The air wasn't as smoky today, but the helicopters were still there, carting their big red buckets. Joe could see one in the distance, heading to the valleys. It was only two weeks since the fire, but it felt like the helicopters had been there forever.

Mum was waiting at the gate. "Hi, love," she said, giving Joe a kiss. She looked tired. "They're short of volunteers today. I might give a hand if you don't mind."

Joe nodded. He didn't mind. He took the two apples his mum held up. "Thanks," he said. "You remembered."

Mum smiled. "Of course I did. One for you, one for Albert."

They arranged to meet in an hour, and Joe started for the stables on the far side of the showgrounds. He liked walking past the goats and chickens and turkeys. Their pens were nearly full, with animals still arriving each day. No wonder they needed more volunteers.

The stable was full, too. Albert was the only alpaca. He was in a stall next to a grey pony named Puffin. Joe stroked his pet's coffee-coloured coat and began to talk quietly.



"Mum got you an apple," he said. "She couldn't come. She's helping out today."

"Hey, Joe." It was Sadia, the girl who rode Puffin. "My mum is helping, too. I'm here for a while. Do you want to take Albert for a walk?"

Joe nodded shyly. He'd always been the quiet one. At his new school, he hadn't made any real friends yet. Sadia was older – she went to intermediate – but they'd both been evacuated at the same time, and they both loved animals. Plus it helped that she liked to talk.

"Take this," she said, handing Joe a red halter. "It was Puffin's, but I'm sure it will fit Albert."

They walked the pony and alpaca to the centre of the showgrounds, where the sheep were grazing. Albert stopped to eat some hay. Most of the feed had been donated. The grass at the showgrounds, like the grass everywhere, was long gone. The drought had seen to that. After the grass, the trees had started dying, which had seemed a terrible thing ... until the fires started.

"You look sad," said Sadia. "What are you thinking about?"

"Mum's orchard," Joe said. "We planted it last autumn. It's probably gone."

Sadia frowned. "The year before my family left Bangladesh, it was a bad rainy season. There were floods, and my grandparents' village washed away. They lost everything – but they survived. That's all that matters, yes?"

Joe nodded. What could he say?

When Dad came to pick them up, he was smiling. “I have good news. We can go home tomorrow.”

“Albert too?” Joe asked.

“Maybe not. We’ll have to see what things are like. Besides, there’s no grass.”

“There was no grass before the fire,” Joe pointed out. “We can buy hay.”

“Don’t rush us, Joe,” Mum said gently. “Albert will be fine for a few more days.”

Joe had trouble sleeping that night. Their unit at the motel was hot and stuffy, and each time he fell asleep, he dreamt about fire – everything burning. He was grateful to the firefighters who had saved their house, but what hadn’t been saved?

The next morning, they packed their few things and drove home. Joe peered out the window, mapping the damage. Their valley had been hard hit. Most of the pine forest was gone, replaced by scorched hills covered in grey ash like snow. In the few places that were still green, wide strips had been bulldozed to form a containment line – one more ugly thing spoiling the view.

“It’ll take a while to stop burning,” Dad said, nodding towards a large dark patch where the forest still smoked. “Don’t worry. They wouldn’t let us back if it wasn’t safe.”

The neighbours’ houses were still there. A few farm buildings were singed, some big trees on the flat were gone, and – strangest of all – there were no animals. The three white goats at the Hagues’ place were gone. So was their miniature pony. There were no sheep, no cows, not even birds – anywhere.



“Mum,” Joe said. “Sadia told me a story.”

“Sadia?”

“My friend at the rescue centre.” He liked saying the word friend. “She told me about her grandparents and the big floods they had in Bangladesh.”

Mum listened and then asked about Sadia. It felt good to have something to talk about, but as they approached their corner, he saw her shoulders tense up.

“Can I walk from here?” he asked.

Outside, the acrid smell of smoke was overpowering, and Joe had to use his inhaler. He walked down the drive, taking it all in. The cabbage trees Dad had planted still stood in their two neat rows, unhappy but alive. The shade trees behind them were harder hit. Most were skeletons. And Mum’s orchard was gone.

Joe had helped plant those trees: apples, peaches, apricots. Before the drought got really bad – and before the water ban – he’d been in charge of watering. He’d never stopped hoping that somehow the orchard had survived.

Mum was in the far corner, sitting at the picnic table. It was a beautiful spot, with a view down to the stream and willow trees, but now it was desolate, everything but the table gone. Joe couldn’t understand how it had survived.

“I’m really sorry, Mum,” he said. He stood, waiting.

Eventually, she spoke. “Well, at least we still have a fence around Albert’s paddock.” This was true. Like the picnic table, the fence hadn’t been touched. The fire made no sense at all. “We’ll pick him up tomorrow,” Mum added.

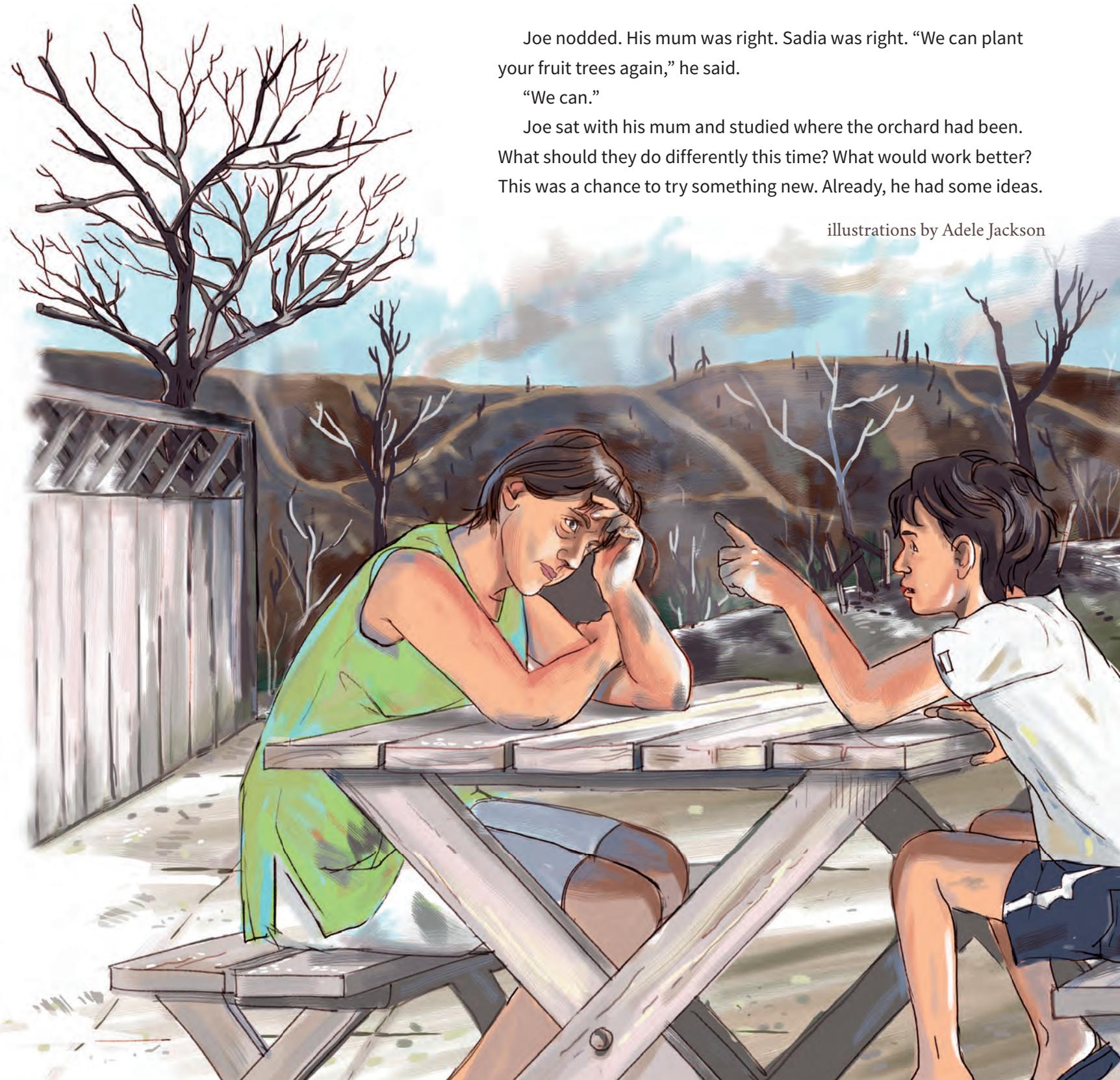
Joe smiled. He was impatient for Albert to come home, but that didn’t help his mum. “It’s OK,” she said, seeing the guilty look on his face. “We’re here. That’s all that matters, like your friend Sadia said.”

Joe nodded. His mum was right. Sadia was right. “We can plant your fruit trees again,” he said.

“We can.”

Joe sat with his mum and studied where the orchard had been. What should they do differently this time? What would work better? This was a chance to try something new. Already, he had some ideas.

illustrations by Adele Jackson



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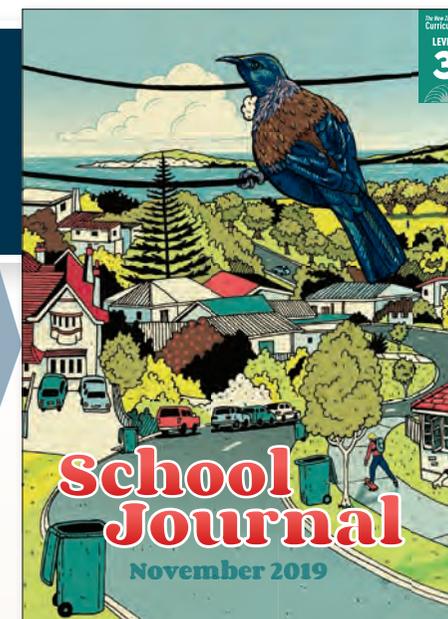
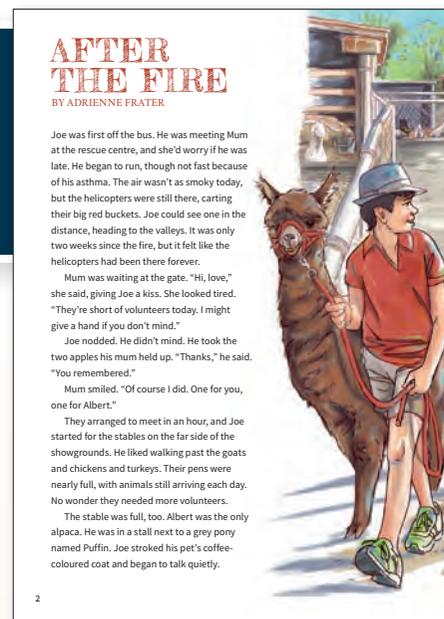
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