

THE WINNING SIDE

by Sarah Johnson

“What you need to win an election,” thought Nia, “is charisma.”

She wasn't exactly sure what charisma was. She'd heard it on TV once, used to describe a famous actor. By the look of him, it meant having a smile so bright it made people blink.

Mrs Lamb, their principal, did *not* have charisma. She'd spent the whole assembly going on about the election. She hadn't smiled once. Mrs Lamb had been inspired by the general election; she wanted their school to have one, too. Students would stand as candidates, and the candidates with the most votes would go on the new student council, which would help make decisions about running the school. All the students had to vote. It was their democratic responsibility.

“I might enter,” Nia told Sefina at break.

“Enter what?”

“The election. Mum says I have a great smile.” Nia flashed her best Hollywood, then explained her theory about charisma.

“It's much better to have an agenda,” said Sefina.



“An agenda,” said Nia. “Why?”

“Because it's what you stand for. You need to focus on some kind of issue. And have a plan.”

“Oh,” said Nia. She didn't have either of those. “What about the paint job in the girls' bathroom? Why do girls always get pink?”

Sefina rolled her eyes. “That's not a real issue. It needs to be something important.” She gave Nia a meaningful look. “You need to be representative too.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know ... diverse. The things you campaign about should matter to all kinds of people. Honestly, Nia. If you paid more

attention in social studies, you'd know all about this.”

Nia shrugged. Mr Hunt, their social studies teacher, had the charisma of a carrot.

“Amy Armstrong has some really good ideas,” Sefina said.

“Amy Armstrong? How do you know?”

“I'm her campaign manager. We're having our first meeting at lunchtime.” Amy was captain of the netball A team. She was also captain of the debating team and sang in the school band. Nia doubted she needed a manager. “You know how the school needs more sports facilities?” Sefina continued.

“Well, Amy came up with the idea of using

the area behind the library. It could fit four new netball courts.”

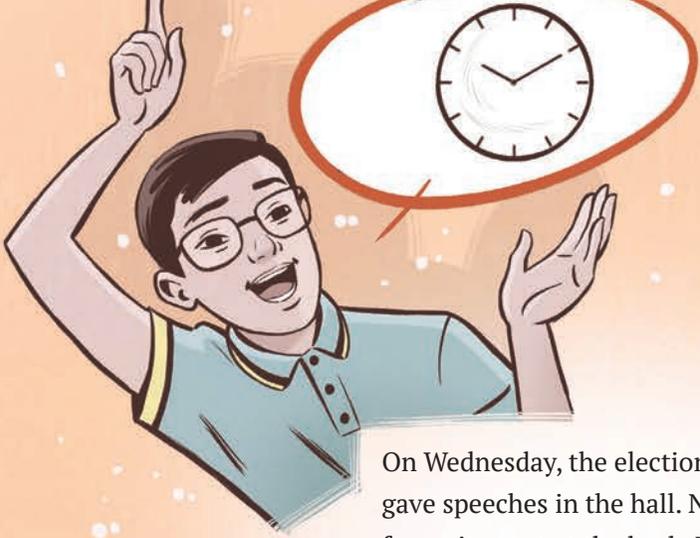
“But that's where the bush block is,” Nia protested.

“So? No one cares about the bush block. The only problem is that all the other sports teams heard Amy's idea, and now they want the space, too. We have a fight on our hands,” Sefina said, looking pleased.

“A fight?” said Nia. “Couldn't you just talk about it?”

Sefina smiled. “Oh, Nia. You have a lot to learn about politics.”

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On Wednesday, the election candidates gave speeches in the hall. Nia sat in her favourite spot at the back. Now that she knew about agendas, she could see that all of the candidates had one – a big idea they were pushing. A couple of students spoke about the unhealthy food at the tuck shop, one wanted to change lesson times, but most of them wanted more space for sports. James Apanui thought rugby should have top priority. Oscar said football. Jane made a convincing case for softball. The only thing the speakers had in common was where they thought the new facilities should be: behind the library, where the bush block was.



Amy Armstrong was the last to speak. She argued that netball was the game of the future. She even quoted statistics, then sang a waiata. There was loud applause.

“What did you think?” Sefina asked Nia on the way out.

“You don’t even like netball,” said Nia.

Sefina grinned. “Got to back the winning side,” she said.



The bush block was behind the library. Nia went there most days. She liked the birds and the big trees – the tōtara and yellow kōwhai and two fat kauri. A few of the trees had been planted to remember people who had died. Their names were on little silver plaques, and the day after the candidates’ speeches, Nia stopped to read some. She wondered what would happen if they did clear the bush. Maybe they’d shift the plaques to other trees, although somehow, that didn’t seem right.

As Nia headed back, she stopped to take a last deep breath. The air smelt of damp shady places, of water and earth.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” said Poppy. She spent a lot of lunchtimes in the bush, too. She liked to draw there. “I can’t believe they want to knock it down.”

“Do you think it’ll happen?” Nia asked.

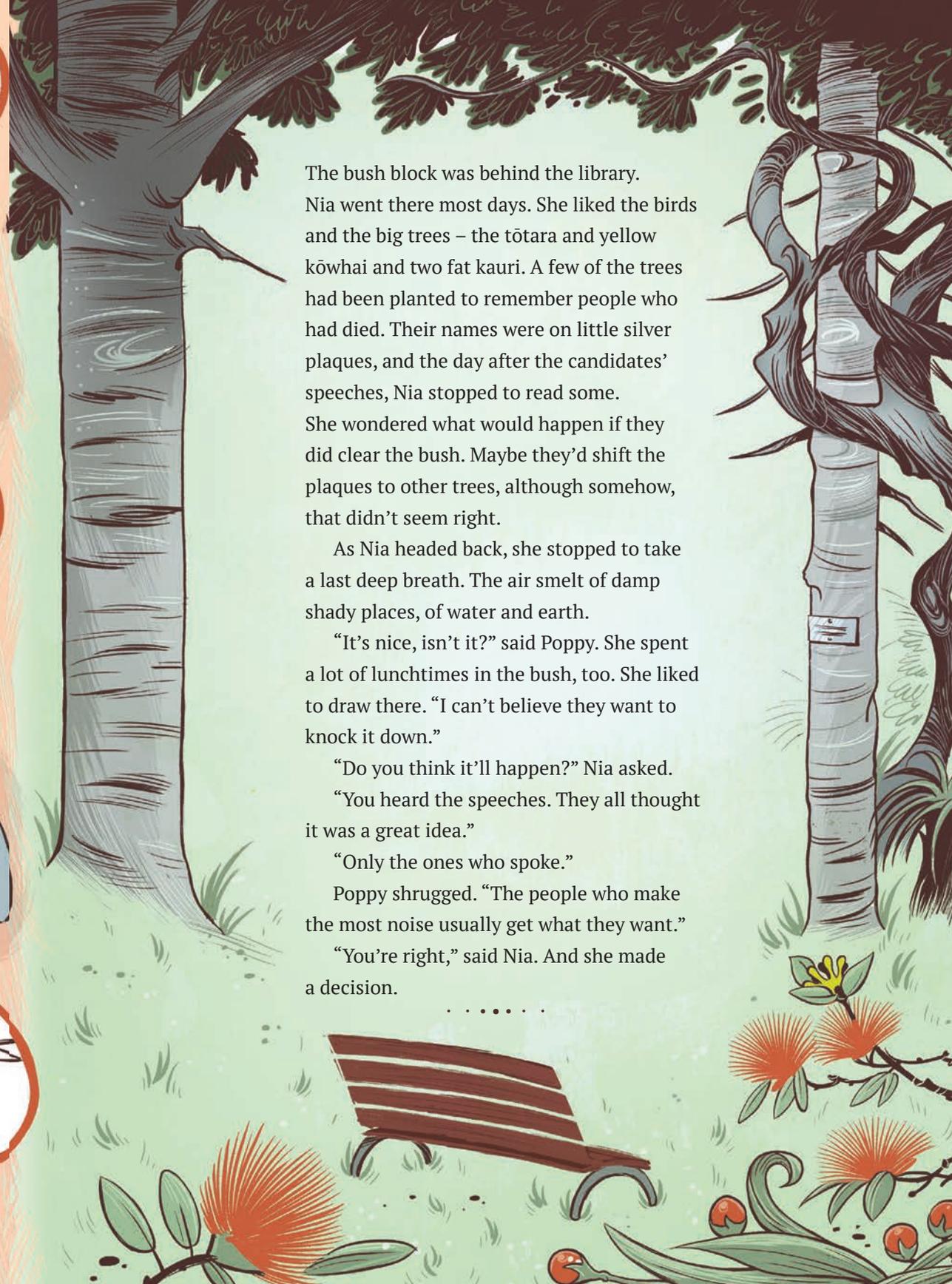
“You heard the speeches. They all thought it was a great idea.”

“Only the ones who spoke.”

Poppy shrugged. “The people who make the most noise usually get what they want.”

“You’re right,” said Nia. And she made a decision.

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On Friday, there were speeches from more candidates. Nia found her seat. Her hands were sweaty, but she was sticking with her plan. Most of these students said the same thing. There was a lot of talk about the bush and using the space for sports. The audience booed and cheered, depending on which sport they played. Then it was Nia's turn. She kept her eyes on her feet as she went up to the stage, forcing herself to breathe slowly. Then she looked up. Sefina's mouth was hanging open like she was watching Mrs Lamb do a tap dance.

Nia began with the bush block and how beautiful it was. She talked about the names on the trees and the kids who used the space and why: to draw or chat or just hang out. Then she talked about the benefits of sport, the way it was good for a person's body and mind. "But being peaceful is also healthy," she added. "And we should recognise that this is a big school and not everyone likes sport. We need to look after the quiet people too, the ones who don't have the most to say. They need somewhere to go to feel comfortable. And that's why we need the bush. That's why we can't get rid of it."

There was silence. Then Mr Kite, the new art teacher, began to clap. Other people clapped as Nia returned to her seat. For the first time, she was sorry she sat at the back. It took a long time to get there.

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After assembly, Poppy came over. "What you said was really good. I hope it works."

On the way back to class, lots of kids stopped Nia. Some said they would vote for her. Others just wanted to talk about the bush. A few even mentioned the plaques.

Sefina was waiting outside their class. "Great speech," she said, "but you'll need a campaign manager."

Nia grinned. "I thought you were Amy's manager?"

"I'm changing sides."

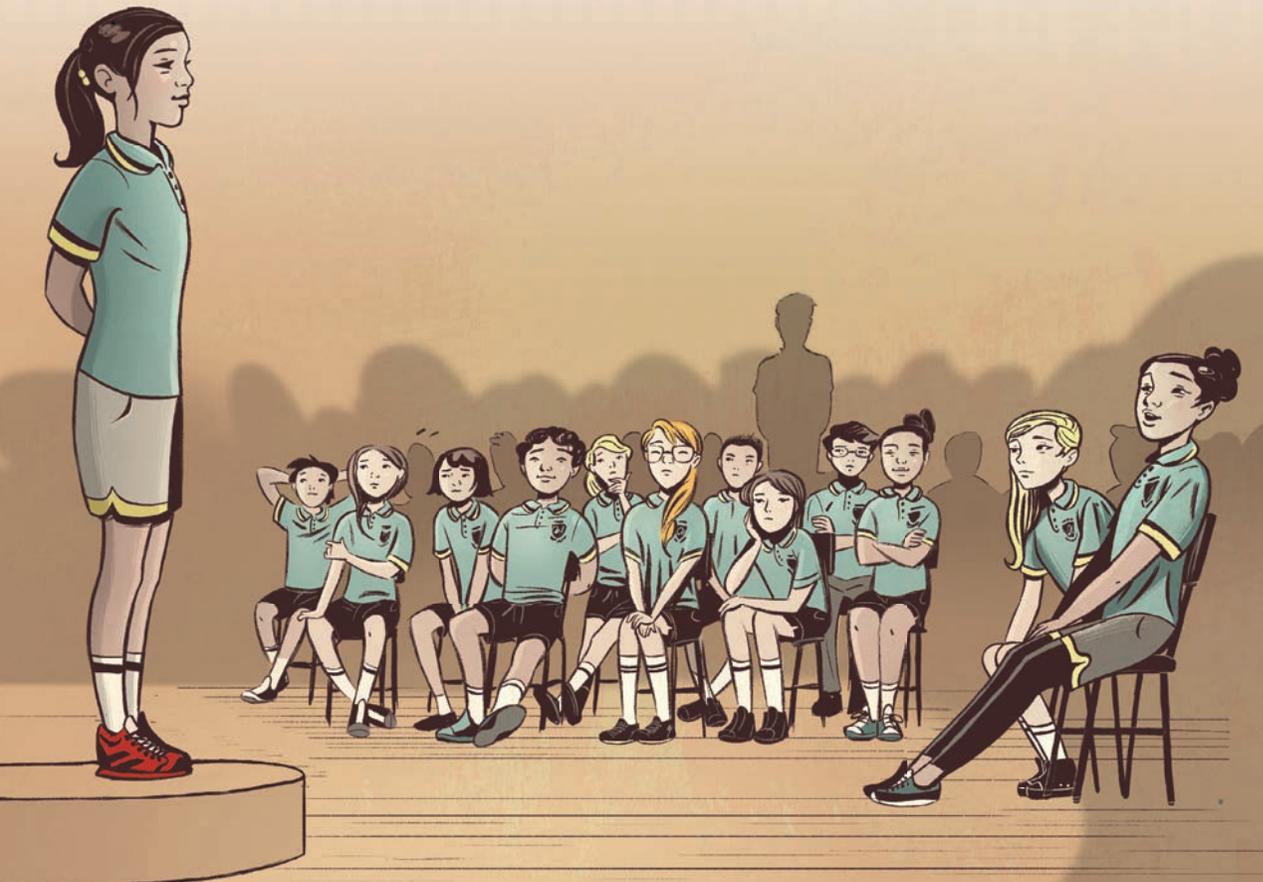
"Can you do that?"

"Course I can. It's politics. I'll come over after school. We'll write your policies."

Nia frowned. "My what?"

Sefina rolled her eyes. "Policies, Nia! What you intend to do once you're elected – your *plan*. You really do need to pay attention in social studies!"

Nia sighed. "I suppose you're right." Then she remembered she was an electoral candidate and flashed Sefina a charismatic smile. "Welcome to the winning side!"



illustrations by Craig Phillips

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