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## Dad's fire

It was Friday evening and I was happy for the first time in days. It was the end of our first week in the country. At dinner I said to Mum and Dad, 'No school for two days! I'm going to stay at home and read all weekend.'

Dad smiled at me. 'There'll be no time to read, Lizzie. I need you all to help me. We're going to clear the fields in front of the house tomorrow. I want to burn the long grass and then dig out the old plants.'

I thought, *Burn grass? Dig out plants? What am I doing here?*

I wasn't very happy in those first days on the farm. I was a city girl. We were from the city, but my dad always wanted to be a farmer. For years he and Mum talked about it, and then one day he told me and my little sister Rosie, 'We've done it, girls. We've bought a farm. I'm leaving my job and we're going to go and live in the country.'

Rosie was very happy. She loved animals and wanted Dad to buy cows, horses and sheep. Mum was happy too. She's a writer and she could write her books in the city or the country. 'It will be good for us all,' she said.

I wasn't happy about moving. I had good friends at school and I liked living in the city. But Dad really wanted to try being a farmer and I wanted him to be happy. So I stayed quiet, and we moved.

The farm was ten kilometres from a village called Avonlee and twenty kilometres from a big town called Pagewood. The place needed a lot of work. The house was old. There was a field in front of the house, but it was full of weeds and long, dry grass. Behind the house there were some fields and

at the back of the farm there were a lot of trees and bushes.

We arrived on a Saturday with all of our things. We didn't get a very friendly welcome. The farmer next door was at the front of his house. He sat on a chair with a bottle in his hand. He was a thin man and there was a thin dog at his feet. There were old cars at the side of the house. Dad called out, 'Hello! I'm Bevan Baxter. We're your new neighbours!'

The man looked at Dad and said, 'City people!' Then he said, 'Come on, dog,' and walked into his house.

On Monday morning I started at Pagewood High School. Rosie went to the primary school in Avonlee. My first week at the new school wasn't very nice. I had to ride my bike to the bus stop and then catch a bus. I didn't know anyone, and no one talked to me. One of the girls in my class, Eve Kirk, was the daughter of the farmer next door. She caught the bus too, with a group of her friends, but they weren't friendly at all.

On Friday I was ready for a quiet weekend. But Dad wanted to burn the grass and dig out the plants.

Mum woke us early on Saturday. It wasn't a hot day and there wasn't any wind. So it was a good day for a fire. After breakfast we got ready.

Dad held a big rake in his hands. 'We need to be careful today,' he said. 'We don't want the fire to get too big, so we'll watch it all the time. I'll stay in front of the fire and clear grass away with this rake. That will help to control it.'

He got two big sacks and put water on them. Then he gave them to Rosie and me. 'You girls hold these, please. Hit the fire with the wet sacks and that will put it out. But stay back. I'll tell you when to do it. Stay behind Mum.'

Mum had a rucksack sprayer full of water on her back. There was a hose coming out of the rucksack. Mum held the hose, ready to put water on the fire.

‘Okay, are we all ready?’ asked Dad. ‘We’ll burn the grass in this field all the way to the fence.’

Dad lit the grass with a match. The fire was small at first. Then the flames got bigger. The fire moved slowly across the field, and the ground behind it was black. Sometimes the flames got too big, so Dad cleared the dry grass away with the rake. Mum, Rosie and I stayed back from the fire, but sometimes Mum went and put a little water onto the flames. We cleared one small piece of ground and then another. It was hard work.

I was hot and stopped for a drink. I heard a voice. There were some children at the neighbour’s fence – two girls and a little boy. They were the Kirk children – Eve and her little sister and brother.

Rosie said, ‘Look! There’s Sue Kirk. She’s in my class at school.’ She walked over to the fence.

Eve shouted at me, ‘Hello, Fatty!’ The children laughed. Rosie did too.

Mum said, ‘Don’t listen to them, Lizzie.’

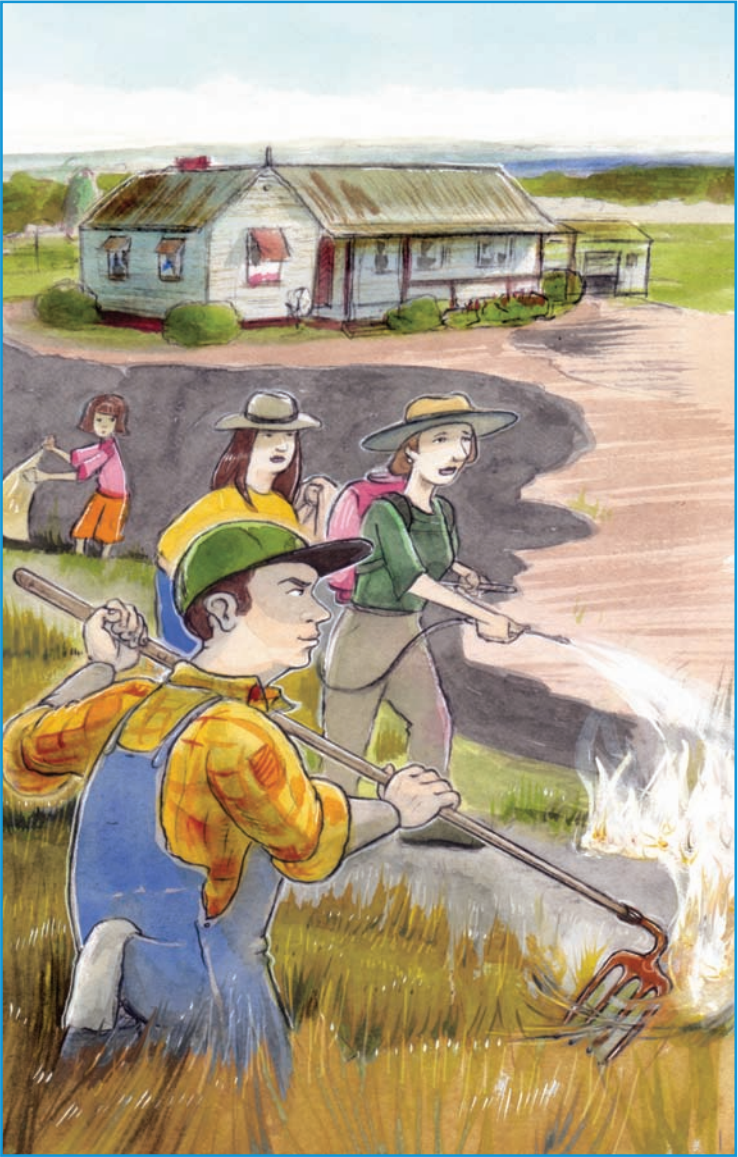
Dad looked over at the children. ‘Come back here, Rosie,’ he called.

She ran back and said, ‘Eve, Sue and Greg want to come and play with me.’

‘No, it’s too dangerous today,’ said Dad. ‘They can visit you another day.’

Mum said, ‘Rosie, don’t laugh at Lizzie. It isn’t kind.’

The Kirk children didn’t go away. They sat and watched us. I heard Eve laugh again. I thought, *Is she laughing at me again?*



I looked down at my body. I was a bit fat. Dad was too. Mum always said to us, 'You mustn't sit down all the time. You need to move more. Play sport, go for a walk.' But I liked sitting. Sitting and reading.

Later in the morning I saw a young man near the fence with the children. He had a red motorbike. He talked to the children and watched our fire too.

At one o'clock Dad said, 'Okay, the fire's out. There's no more grass to burn.'

Mum said, 'We'll eat lunch and have a rest now, Bevan.'

Dad said, 'Okay. We can start to dig out the plants after lunch.'

*Oh no, I thought. When can I just sit down and read?*

My legs and hands hurt. There was dirt on my face and smoke in my eyes. I wanted to sleep for a week, but after lunch we all went back to the fields. Dad gave everyone a spade.

The Kirk children weren't on the fence now. Rosie was sad. 'I like Sue Kirk. I wanted to talk to her again.'

Mum said, 'Is the older girl nice too, Rosie?'

'That's Eve,' said Rosie. 'She's fourteen, Lizzie – like you.'

'I know,' I said. 'She's in my class.'

'You could be friends,' said Rosie.

'Never!'

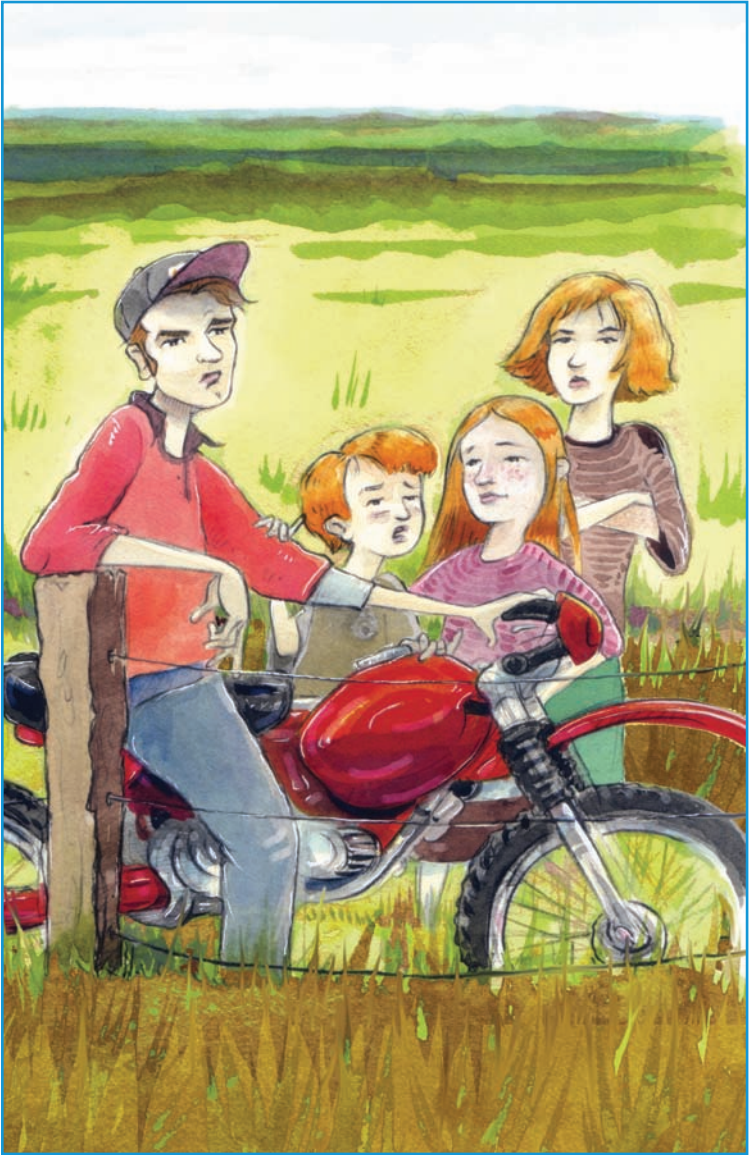
'Isn't she nice?' Mum asked.

'Not really,' I said and started to dig the ground with my spade.

We dug dead, black plants out of the ground. At last Mum said, 'We're all tired, Bevan. Can we stop now?'

Dad said, 'Okay. We've done good work today. Look!'

We looked at the black fields. Mum said, 'It's ugly without the grass, isn't it?'



Dad said, 'The grass will grow again, Meredith. We'll plant new trees and you can have flower gardens.'

Mum took his hand and said, 'It will be beautiful one day.'

We ate dinner and went to bed early. There was more work to do the next day.