

The Fire that Jack Built

“The fire isn’t far from your veggie garden,” said the fire fighter to me. “What would you like us to take out of the house first?”

I goggled at him in horror, dumbstruck. What on earth would I choose?

I’d come back from work that day, another day working for the Salvation Army teaching trainees horticulture, just another day at the office it seemed. It was warm, radio going in the car to pass the pleasant journey from Whakatane to our rural coastal home at Bryan’s Beach. It took thirty minutes and just past half way, I noticed a plume of smoke in the sky.

“What farmer is silly enough to do a burn-off at this time of year?” I thought. As I got nearer, the plume seemed to be much closer to home than I thought. “I wonder what’s happening,” I muttered, speeding up a little. “That’s coming from Bryan’s Beach!”

➔ I turned off the main highway at Waiotahi and picked up more speed alongside the river. Becoming more agitated each moment, I rounded the bend where the road leaves the river but the amazing vista of the white sandy beach, blue sea and sky and Whale Island serenely overlooking it didn’t even register.

The smoke plume was thicker, I could smell it. Oh my God, there was a fire engine parked by our letter box and another down the drive on our front lawn! I screamed to a halt beside it and flew out of the truck without my shoes. Hoses snaked from the fire engine through our garage and laundry out to the back courtyard, usually the scene of a pleasant gin and tonic at this time of day. Not today. Flames were raging below the smoke plume in the valley beyond our home.

“What on earth is going on?” I asked my husband Ray who’d appeared beside me.

“Jack was doing a bit of a burn-off for the neighbour and it got out of control,” he answered. “That kikuia grass looks green but underneath it’s dry as a bone.”

“His shelter belt trimmings are just piled under the trees,” I fretted. “They’ve been there for years and are really dry. One spark...” my voice trailed off at the envisaged horror. I got together the belongings I thought should be saved and had a gin and tonic anyway. I was shaking and frightened, and cuddled my dog for comfort.

“We’re hoping for a change in the wind,” explained a fire man. “Right now it’s coming off the land towards the sea – and your house is in the path of the flames. At this time of day, it usually changes to blowing from the sea to the land. When that happens, the fire will head up the valley. That’s what we’re waiting for.”

Ray and I sat down and prayed, each in our own fashion. After an age, the fire fighters seemed to be winning, had the flames under control. The wind change had saved us. When they were satisfied there were no hot spots left they departed for Opotiki, leaving only large tyre depressions in our lawn to mark their presence.

Poor old Jack though didn’t get off so lightly. He was taken to Waikato Hospital with chest pains in the middle of the night. His efforts had proved too much for his aging body.

The next day I checked out our back boundary. True enough, the burnt out area was just a few metres from my broad beans. We had all been very lucky with the timely wind change.

Kinsa Hays February 2012