

After the First Rain

by Anna Smaill

After the first rain, everything changed. That night – when we heard the giant crack of the rain machine shooting its flares into the bone-dry sky and the heavens open – it was like one huge party.

Light after light in all the houses blinked on. People came out wearing their morning faces to gaze up at the sky. They put their hands and tongues out to the rain. Even though it was a party, it was private too, like everyone had gone deep

inside themselves. I only learnt how deep the dust had got in my skin when the rain washed it off.

I had thought the earth would drink it in. But by the following day, our terraces had turned into a slick of ochre-coloured mud – like when a fly settles on a horse's neck and it shivers to shake the fly off. The earth shivered the mud off, and the retaining walls were swept away, the seedlings with them.

In the days after, I walked with Gran along the road, and she pointed out the erosion. New words: *entrainment*, *deposition*. She was full of excitement as she tested me, quizzed me, like usual. She was walking slower.

Two things happened next. One was quick. The other not so quick.

The first was that people from the government came for the rain machine. Early one day, they transported the contraption and the rolled-up blueprints and a whole lot of materials. It was quite the procession. The bucket man went, too, and he waved regally from his seat in the back.

In the months after, gossip drifted back from the city. Prototypes. A new research facility. People buzzed. And as if to show they were right, there was rain in the north, clouds of different sizes and textures like the news floating back to us.

The second thing was Gran dying. At first, it was so slow you could pretend it wasn't happening. I thought we'd have all the time in the world. I wanted her to keep teaching me everything she knew, from cell mitosis to isobars. But in the end, she had just a small amount of herself left. Just enough to sit, and then just enough to lie in bed, and then just enough to breathe. Then not even that. We were all left behind.



After Gran died, my family treated me like I was going to break. I wanted to do it for real. I wanted to take the science textbooks Gran and I had studied together and rip out the pages. They had no meaning now. There was no one else who knew what she knew.

What I did instead was work. I helped rebuild the retaining walls. We used old windows from the tip to make a greenhouse for new crops. I didn't come home covered in dust any more. It was all mud. Work felt like pressing a bruise; it gave a dull sort of satisfaction. That was how it went for five months, maybe six. Digging, mud, trips to the reservoir, and that dull slow ache that never went away.

One morning – it must have been early summer because we were planting beans – I was leaving for the reservoir.

I went less often now. Because of the rain, the tanks were usually at least half-full. Mum came and swung two extra drums up into the cart.

“What are they for?” I asked.

She moved her head to indicate the southern ridge where the bucket man used to live, where he and Gran had built the rain machine together.

“He’s back. He’ll be wanting his delivery.”

I couldn't help it. I thought about the night I told Gran about the bucket man building his crazy contraption on the hill, the one based on her design. The way light came into her eyes.

I waited as long as I could. I took the slow route home from the reservoir, but I couldn't put it off forever. I walked up the same path, knocked at the same door.



The flat land out the back was empty. The front room was dark, the windows open. I went in.

The bucket man was sitting at the end of the room. There were books everywhere, the stacks as high as me, and lots of equipment. Bunsen burners. A microscope. Other stuff I recognised from Gran's lessons. I felt strange. I could hardly breathe. There was something sharp inside my chest, a bright point.

The bucket man turned and flicked on a light. I blinked.

“You're a lot muddier than when I saw you last,” he said.

I felt a surge of anger. He was laughing at me. He was alive and Gran wasn't.

“I put the water out front,” I said. My face twisted in a way I couldn't stop. I turned, walked towards the door.

“Hold on,” he said. “Why are you going?”

I turned back. I didn't have time for this. I'd done the delivery and wanted to leave.

“I've got work to do,” I said.

“What kind of work?”

“On the terraces,” I said.

He looked at me steadily, with blue eyes like the sky.

“You're her grandson,” he said.

Maybe he'd gone a bit crazy in the city.

“Yes.”

“She told me about you.”



"Why didn't you stay in the city?" I asked. "Don't they need your expertise on cloud seeding? On Gran's machine. Aren't you famous now you've solved all our problems?"

He shook his head, slowly. "You think the rain machine did that?"

I shrugged. "Of course. Everyone does."

He let his breath out slowly. "They wanted to look at it. The technology is promising. But cloud seeding is nothing new, and a single machine can't undo decades of human devastation."

"But the rains are back," I said.

"The weather changes all the time. Your gran knew that. She was always watching. We seized the right moment. But we need a better solution. Bigger ideas."

"What's the point of any of it, then?"

I asked. "Gran's dead. The rain machine

won't save us. I need to do the planting." I started to leave again.

"You asked me why I didn't stay in the city," said the bucket man.

I waited for him to go on.

"You," he said. "You were the reason. It was important to your gran that I knew, that I saw what she saw. She downplayed it at first."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"'Jack has a brain on him.' That's what she said. Anyone could see how excited she was. By you, your curiosity. She said she'd never met anyone so hungry to learn. Why else did she spend all that time teaching you?"

I closed my eyes. I didn't want to see him. "So?" I said.



"So," he said. "Your gran is dead, and I'm sorry. In a few years, I'll be gone, too. Your gran stayed with you as long as she could. She needed to know someone would keep her knowledge alive. That's you, son – and that's why I'm back. It's not for my sake. Or for your gran's. Or even for yours. It's because of this ..." He gestured to the window, to the green hills, to the sky and whatever was beyond. "If there's no one to carry that knowledge, we might lose it. We need all the brains on the problem we can get."

I stared at the bucket man. I'd always thought of him as a crazy old man, but his eyes were clear and steady. I stayed as still as I could. Perhaps because something was happening inside me. It was like salt or the moment the rain bursts through. The sharpness was dancing in my veins, electric, right down my fingers. They were

waking up from sleep. For a second, I had a crazy thought – it's Gran's knowledge. The gift she shared with me. It's waking up, tingling, coming back to life.

And I heard her voice. She'd never once said anything about me to my face. But I heard her talking now, in her own wry tone. It was more than an echo – it was so real. "Jack has a brain on him."

A brain on him. I felt warmth go right through me, a small flame of it. A guardian, I thought. I don't know where the word came from. But I knew it was right. I knew the bucket man was right.

I turned slowly as if I was still considering.

The night sky stretched out and with it, all the things I didn't know, all the things I still had to learn.

I nodded. "OK," I said. And then I said it again. "When do we start?"



After the First Rain

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Published 2022 by the Ministry of Education,
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77690 825 7 (online)
ISSN 2624 3636 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Jodi Wicksteed
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Ariana Tikao and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 4 NOVEMBER 2022	
Curriculum learning areas	English Health and PE
Reading year level	Year 8
Keywords	climate change, environment, family, guardian, invention, kaitiakitanga, knowledge, learning, rain, speculative fiction, survival, technology, weather