

Fireworks Free

Story by John Carr

Illustrations by Philip Webb



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Published by Wendy Pye Publishing Limited for SPCA Education

Text by John Carr

Illustrations by Philip Webb

ISBN: 978-1-99-102064-2

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Distributed in New Zealand by SPCA

50 Westney Road, Mangere, Auckland 2022

Replacement copies can be purchased from: spca.nz/storybooks

Printed in China through Colorcraft Ltd, Hong Kong.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Chapter 1

Suddenly, the silence of the night was ripped apart by a boom and a burst of colourful light in the sky. The explosion was so loud that Sammy reared up on his hind legs in fright.

In the distance he could hear people cheering and laughing. Sammy wanted to escape. He cantered swiftly to the gate where Shiloh usually came to feed, saddle or brush him. She was his favourite person. He needed her calming voice and pats right now.



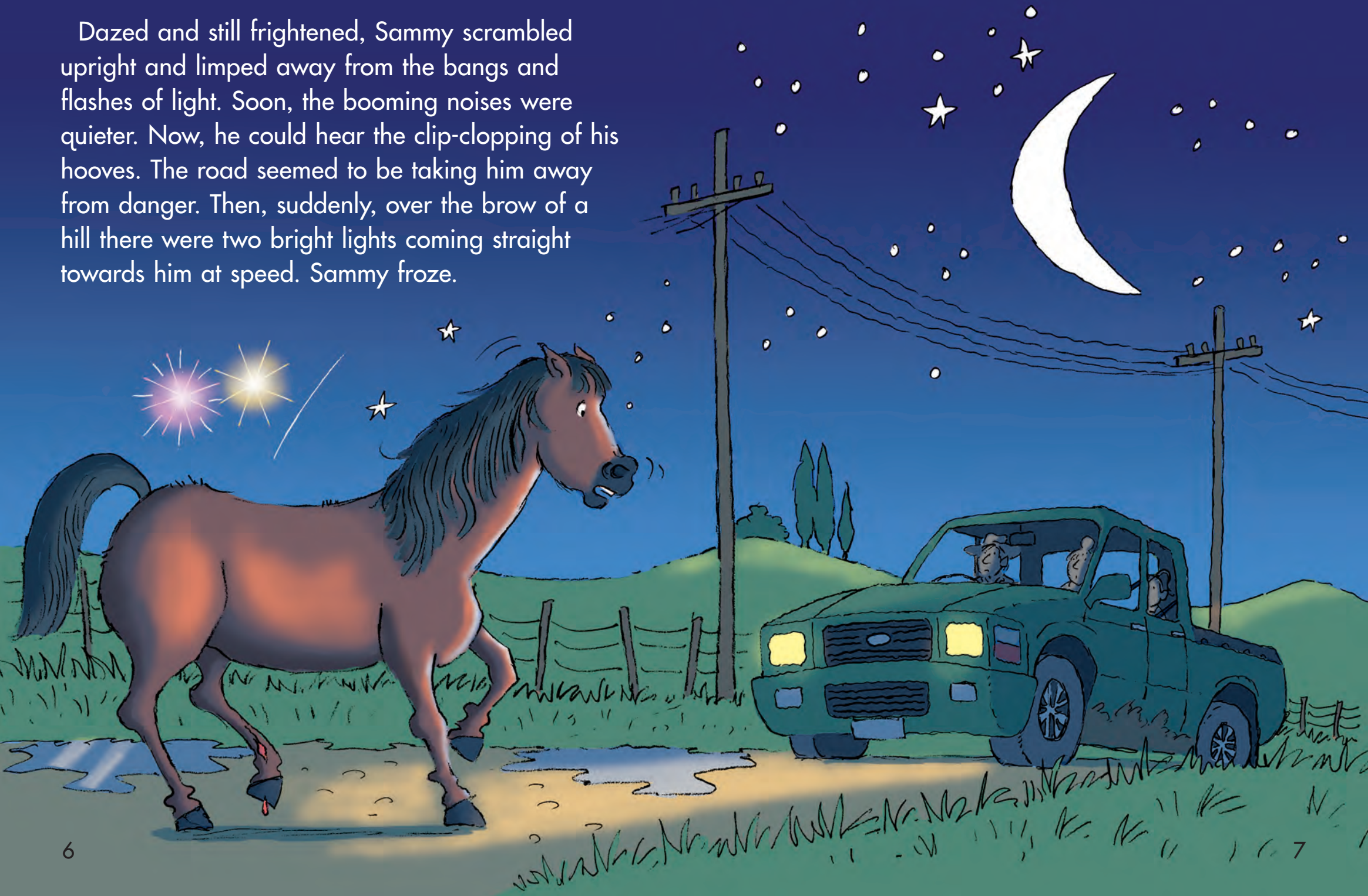
But Shiloh wasn't there and the wooden gate was closed. There was a whistling sound in the distance followed by another deafening explosion of light in the sky. It panicked Sammy into a fearful gallop in the opposite direction.

Another burst of light lit up the fence that Sammy was galloping towards. His hooves dug deep into the ground as he sped forward. Sammy had jumped over small hurdles in the past, but always in daylight, and always with Shiloh on his back. He had never hurdled anything as high as the gate in this fence before but he had to do it. He had to get away from the noise.

Sammy's front hooves cleared the top of the gate. But his hind legs crashed through it. He landed in the grass on the other side.



Dazed and still frightened, Sammy scrambled upright and limped away from the bangs and flashes of light. Soon, the booming noises were quieter. Now, he could hear the clip-clopping of his hooves. The road seemed to be taking him away from danger. Then, suddenly, over the brow of a hill there were two bright lights coming straight towards him at speed. Sammy froze.



Chapter 2

Shiloh's dad skidded the ute to a halt on the side of the road.

"It's a horse," shouted Shiloh's mum.

"It's Sammy!" screamed Shiloh.

Dad grabbed a torch, a rope and a halter from the back of the ute. Then he approached Sammy slowly so as not to scare him. Shiloh wanted to go too but her mum wouldn't let her until Sammy was safely off the road.

Dad led Sammy into the long grass at the side of the road and tied him to a fence. Shiloh called calming words to her horse through the open window.

"He's bleeding, Dad!" shouted Shiloh.

"He has a cut on his hind leg," said Dad. "The fireworks must have panicked him and he's jumped a fence. You two stay here and keep him calm. I'll go home and get the float."

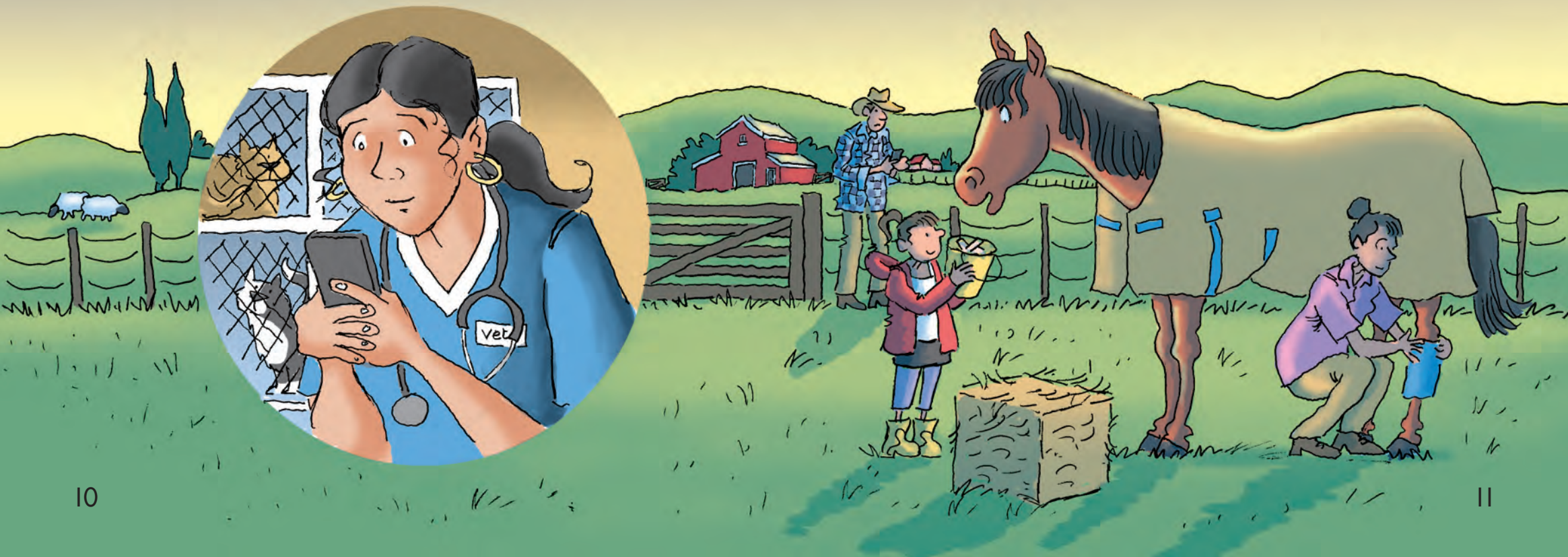


Chapter 3

The fireworks party at a nearby property had finished by the time Shiloh and Dad had settled Sammy into the top paddock closer to their house. Shiloh gave him a gentle brush, put out some fresh hay and fed him some of his favourite turnips. She chatted to him while Mum put an antiseptic dressing on his injured leg and Dad messaged the vet in town.

The next morning, when Shiloh went to check on Sammy, Dr Pirini, the vet, was treating him.

“There’s no permanent damage,” she said. “He was lucky – bruising and a few stitches. It could have been a lot worse. He’s the third horse I’ve treated this morning, as well as the usual list of injured and traumatised pets and livestock. I wish someone would come up with a safer way of celebrating fireworks night.”



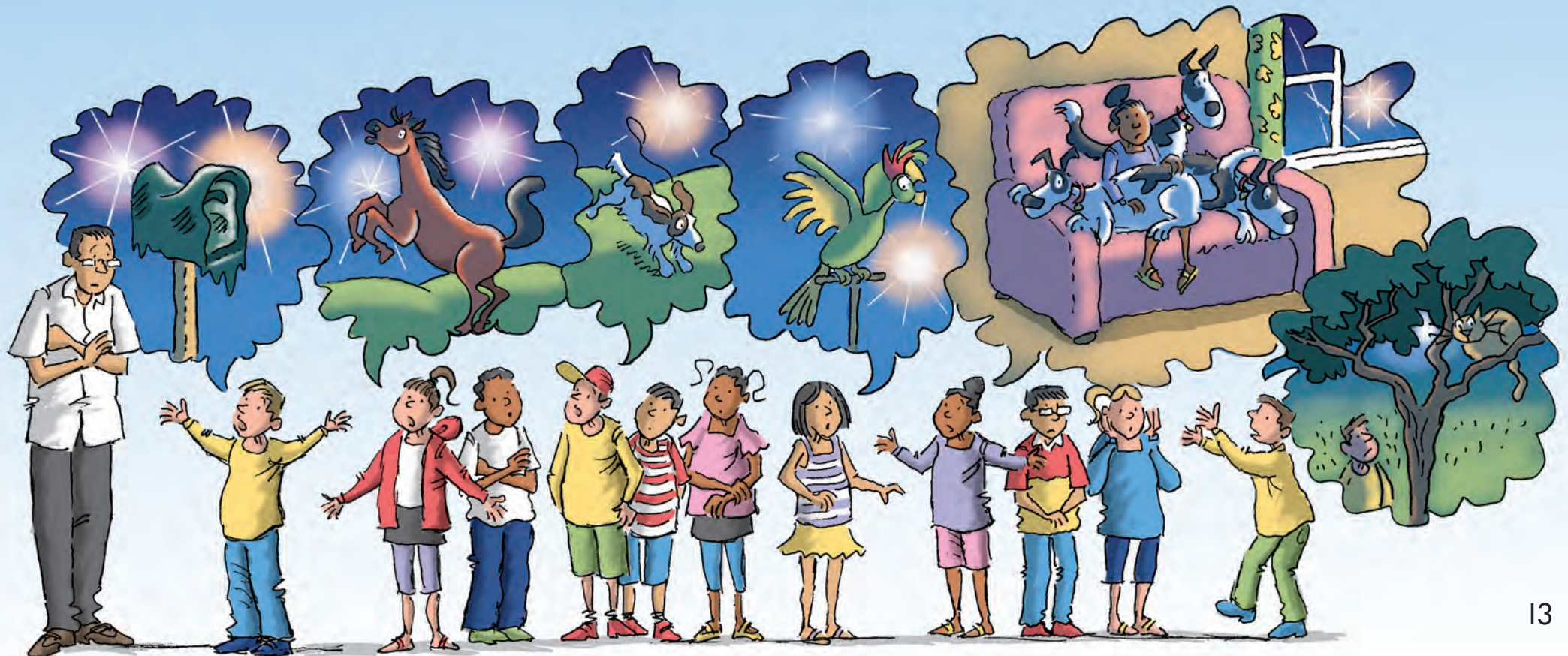
Chapter 4

Dr Pirini's wish was on Shiloh's mind on the bus trip to school that morning. The trip had been a rowdy babble of chat. Children talked about the fun, exciting, dangerous and sad things that had happened the night before.

The babble continued when Mr Kohli asked Room 10 to share their experiences. The first report was about the Johnsons' plastic letterbox. It had melted after someone lit a firecracker inside it.

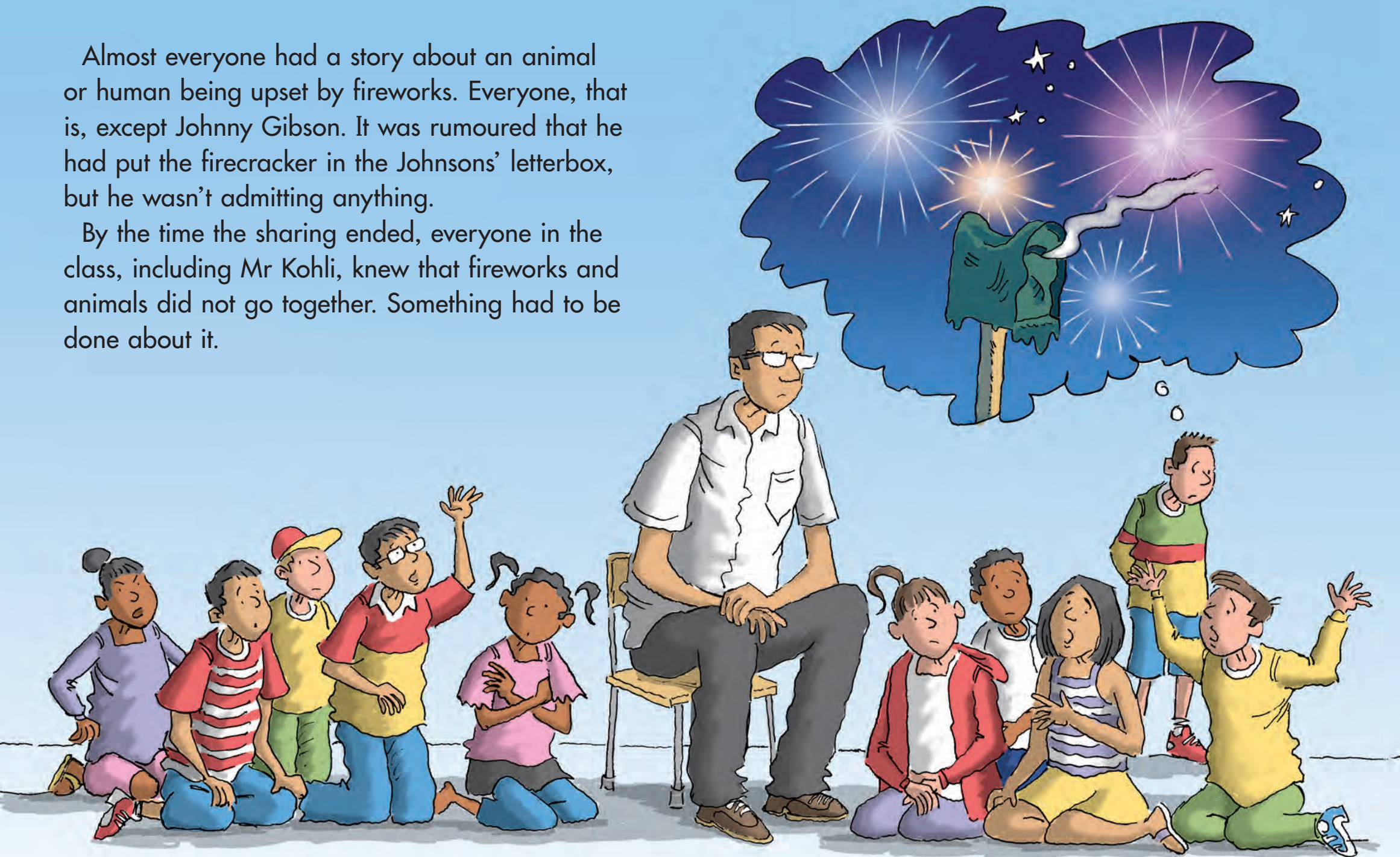
Shiloh's story sparked a flood of other stories of animals traumatised by fireworks. Jamie's dog had run away and still hadn't returned home. Shelly's parakeet had squawked all night. Aroha had spent the night on a couch calming three frightened farm dogs. Steve had climbed a walnut tree to rescue his terrified cat and take her back to his house.

Jamie's dad had noticed wildlife scurrying out of the bushes behind where they lived. They were distressed, too.



Almost everyone had a story about an animal or human being upset by fireworks. Everyone, that is, except Johnny Gibson. It was rumoured that he had put the firecracker in the Johnsons' letterbox, but he wasn't admitting anything.

By the time the sharing ended, everyone in the class, including Mr Kohli, knew that fireworks and animals did not go together. Something had to be done about it.



Chapter 5

Room 10 didn't waste any time. By afternoon interval, their class brainstorm covered the whole whiteboard. They had the beginnings of a three-part plan to make people realise that fireworks weren't good for all animals.

Part A was to educate people who use fireworks on the harm and distress they cause to animals. Mr Kohli asked the children whose animals had been scared or injured to write their stories.

By the end of the week, the stories, along with photos of pets and a video interview with Dr Pirini, were up on the school's website. The stories quickly started to get attention both from people in the school community and from further afield.

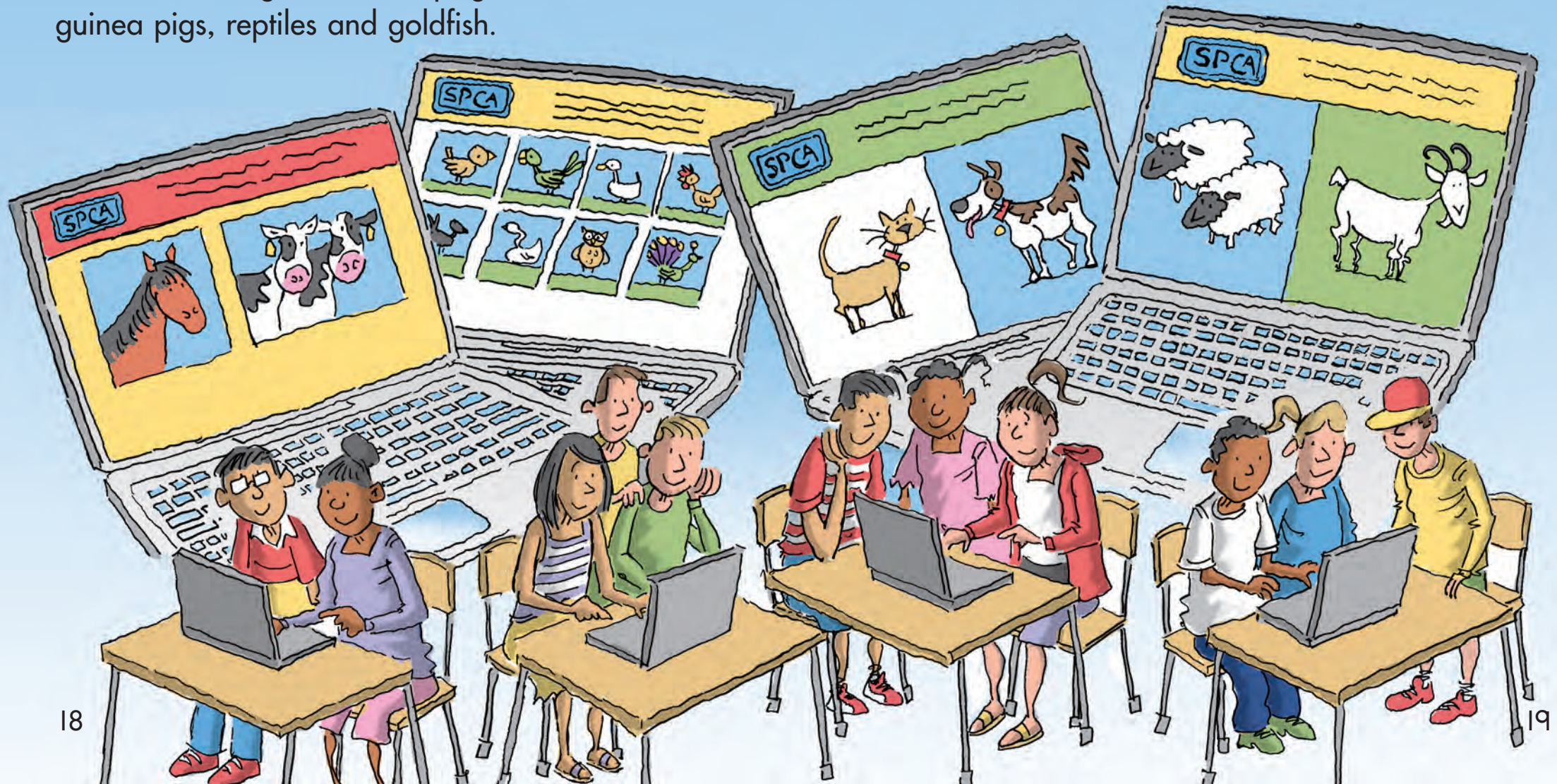


Part B was to give advice to animal owners. This would help to keep their animals calm and safe on fireworks nights.

The class was divided into small groups. Each group researched and wrote a safety plan for a different type of animal. These included horses, cattle, birds, dogs, cats, sheep, goats, rabbits, guinea pigs, reptiles and goldfish.

When this information had been added to the website, Part C was set in motion. It was to turn their whole town and the surrounding countryside into a Fireworks Free Zone.

Everyone expected this would be the hard part, but they were wrong.



Chapter 6

Mr Mortill had been mayor for 15 years and he got annoyed when people still called his town “Turnip Town”. Turnips were no longer the main crop in the area but the name had stuck.

Mr Mortill had adopted a mixed breed dog named Bruno from SPCA who was frightened of fireworks. That was why he accepted Room 10’s invitation to listen to them talk about turning the town into a fireworks free zone. The mayor was enthusiastic.

“I think this is a great idea,” he told Room 10 after their presentation. Suddenly, Mr Mortill realised that this could also be a chance to be famous for something other than turnips.

“We could be the first fireworks free zone in the country! We won’t be turnips any more. We’ll be leaders!” he said.

He pointed at the poster that Shiloh had made for the presentation.

“There’s the billboard to put at the entrance to the town,” he said. “I’m going to promote this idea to the town council!” And he did.



Chapter 7

It was fireworks night again, but this time the whole town and the farms around it were part of the first fireworks free zone in the country.

It was a Saturday night, and Sammy was happy. With Shiloh on his back, he was down at the town's lakeside for the lantern lights display. This had been Room 11's idea. Paper lanterns floated on the lake. Children and families had decorated their own and launched them to create a vista of colour and light.

Everyone seemed to have a great time. Even Mr MacIntyre. He was not selling fireworks in his shop this year, but did very well selling eco-friendly glow sticks from a stall. Jamie's dog had been found and they were there too.

As Shiloh led Sammy back to his float at the end of the evening, she heard Mayor Mortill talking to a television news crew.

"You can put all this down to a class of concerned children at the local school," he said. "They've started something and I hope it spreads."



Fireworks Facts and Tips

- Some people enjoy fireworks, but they can be terrifying and overwhelming for many companion, farmed and wild animals.
- Being fearful is a natural behaviour that an animal cannot control. It's important never to punish your animal for being scared.
- Although fireworks are only on sale for four days a year, they can be used throughout the year, so it's important for responsible animal guardians to be prepared for fireworks displays at any time.
- Farmed animals, especially horses, are easily frightened by loud noises and flashes of bright light, which can startle them and cause them to injure themselves on fencing and farm equipment. Check that your animals' paddock fencing is secure and there are no dangerous objects they could collide with if startled.
- Fireworks can also disturb wildlife. Don't use fireworks near known animal habitats like lakes with wetland birds and trees with nesting and roosting birds.
- Keeping your companion animals inside, closing the windows, curtains and blinds, gates and doors, blocking off cat doors/flaps, playing soft, calming music, providing your dog with a long lasting food-toy, and/or creating dens for your animals to hide in are all great ways to create a calm environment for your companions.
- Ask your whānau to make sure your companion animals are microchipped and registered with up-to-date contact details, just in case they are panicked by the fireworks and manage to escape. A microchip means the likelihood of them being reunited with you will be much greater.

Visit [spca.nz/kids](https://www.spcanew Zealand.org.nz/kids) to learn more about caring for animals and keeping them safe.

Ruby

ISBN 978-1-99-102064-2

