

# Ship's Captain

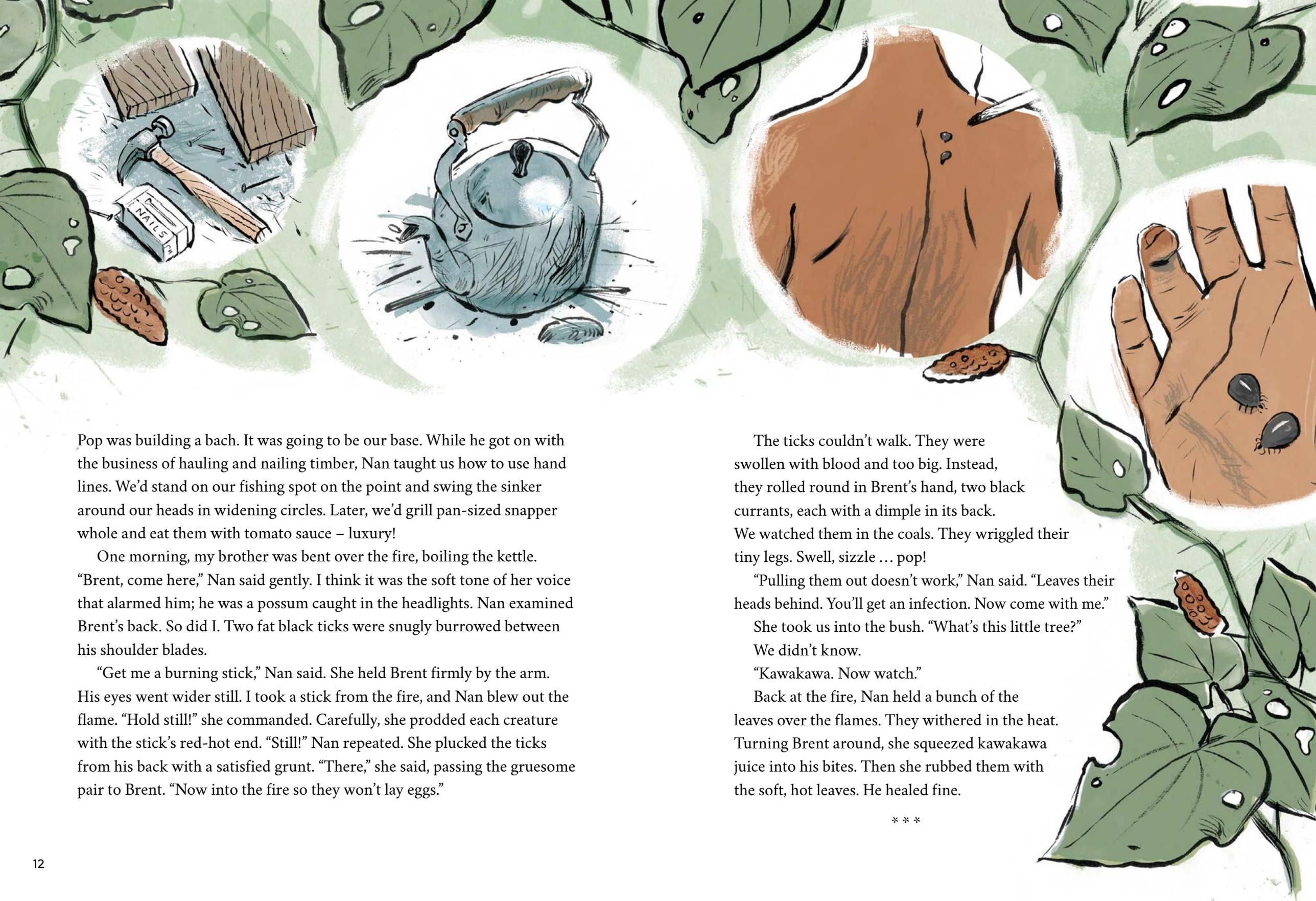
by Fraser Smith

My nan always said I should be the captain of my own ship. Which was weird because I didn't feel like a captain when she was around. Nan was captain of her ship ... and everyone else's! When we were in Hawke's Bay, she wouldn't let us talk to any Māori. They'd wave and say hello, and she'd put her nose in the air. When Nan wasn't listening, Pop would say, "They're tūrangawaewae. Wave. Your nan's being a Ngāpuhi princess."

Up north, Nan was different. She would wave and kōrero to everyone. She was happiest on her land on the Whangaruru Harbour. Getting there was a two- or three-day trip, the last bit by boat. While Pop rowed the dinghy back for the second load, Nan had me and my brother, Brent, carry the gear up the beach. Then we'd pitch camp. We'd stretch a big tarp across a low pōhutukawa branch. That was the kitchen roof. Our beds were wooden frames filled with mingimingi scrub.

Once we'd settled in, we stayed put. There was a shop, but it was a long walk around the oyster rocks at low tide. Those oyster shells were sharp, and if you cut yourself, Nan would have to dig out the shell with a needle. Any bits left would lead to infection. If that happened, Nan would plunge your swollen foot in hot water. "As hot as you can bear," Nan would say (it was always hotter). Then you got a ponga poultice.

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Pop was building a bach. It was going to be our base. While he got on with the business of hauling and nailing timber, Nan taught us how to use hand lines. We'd stand on our fishing spot on the point and swing the sinker around our heads in widening circles. Later, we'd grill pan-sized snapper whole and eat them with tomato sauce – luxury!

One morning, my brother was bent over the fire, boiling the kettle. "Brent, come here," Nan said gently. I think it was the soft tone of her voice that alarmed him; he was a possum caught in the headlights. Nan examined Brent's back. So did I. Two fat black ticks were snugly burrowed between his shoulder blades.

"Get me a burning stick," Nan said. She held Brent firmly by the arm. His eyes went wider still. I took a stick from the fire, and Nan blew out the flame. "Hold still!" she commanded. Carefully, she prodded each creature with the stick's red-hot end. "Still!" Nan repeated. She plucked the ticks from his back with a satisfied grunt. "There," she said, passing the gruesome pair to Brent. "Now into the fire so they won't lay eggs."

The ticks couldn't walk. They were swollen with blood and too big. Instead, they rolled round in Brent's hand, two black currants, each with a dimple in its back. We watched them in the coals. They wriggled their tiny legs. Swell, sizzle ... pop!

"Pulling them out doesn't work," Nan said. "Leaves their heads behind. You'll get an infection. Now come with me."

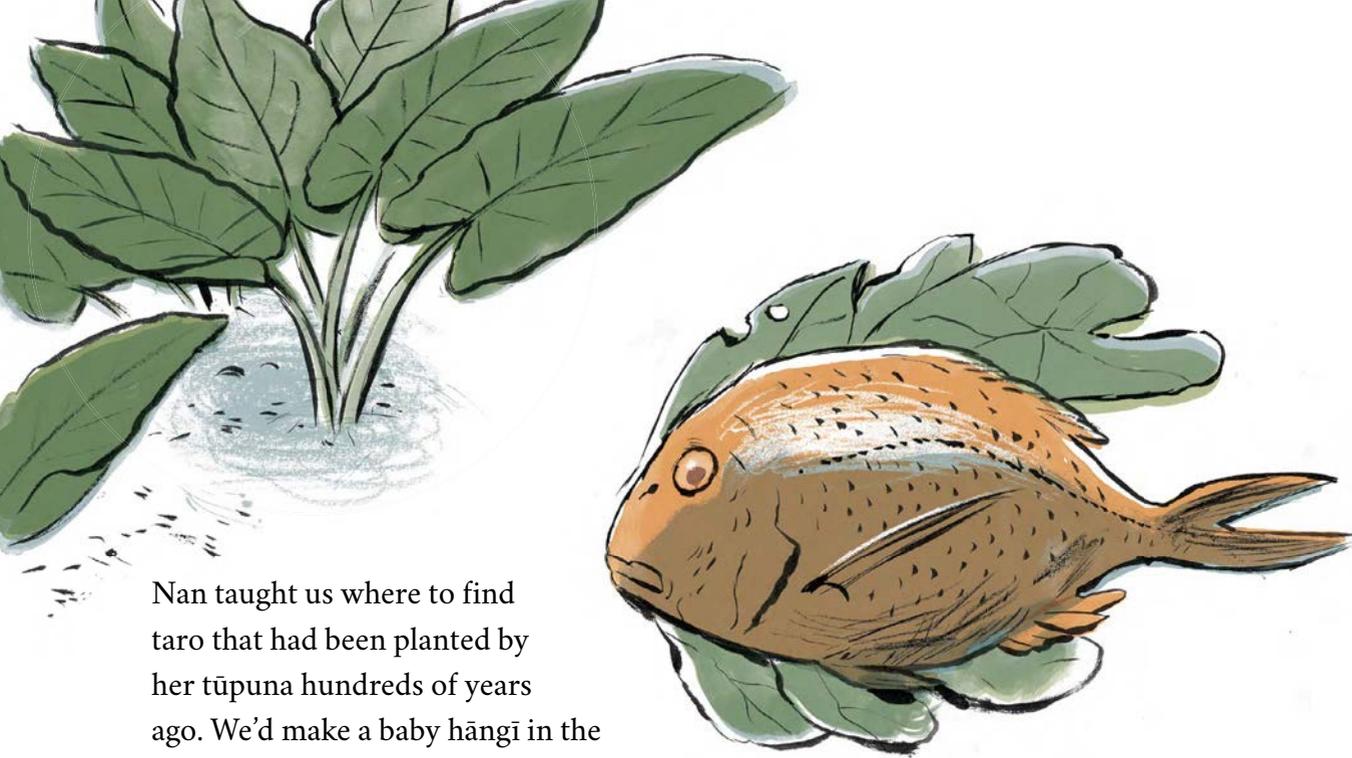
She took us into the bush. "What's this little tree?"

We didn't know.

"Kawakawa. Now watch."

Back at the fire, Nan held a bunch of the leaves over the flames. They withered in the heat. Turning Brent around, she squeezed kawakawa juice into his bites. Then she rubbed them with the soft, hot leaves. He healed fine.

\* \* \*



Nan taught us where to find taro that had been planted by her tūpuna hundreds of years ago. We'd make a baby hāngī in the moist sand between the tides, cooking the taro along with fish wrapped in the vegetable's leaves. Sometimes we boiled the fish heads and backbones, drained off the liquid, and added chopped onion. We thickened this soup with dried sea lettuce. It kept you full. We also smoked pipi on flax strings over the fire. Brent and I wore the pipi as necklaces around our necks. We ate them like chewing gum. We smelt a bit weird, I guess, but no one complained.

Most low tides would find us out on the rocks, looking for kina, mussels, and oysters or digging for pipi and cockles in the sand. We sizzled our shellfish over the fire in the evenings and ate them hot, sipping the juice from the shells. We always cooked a few extra pipi for bait. Cooked, they stayed on the hook better. A camp oven always waited by the fire for the next course.

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"I want to show you how to make a whare raupō," Nan said one day.

We gathered armloads of raupō reeds from the swamp by the taro patch. Pop cut some mānuka poles and made a tiny house frame, lashing the poles together with flax. We bound the reeds in tight packets and tied them to the frame to make the roof and walls. Pop hung a tarp over the thatched roof. "Another luxury!" he said. The entrance was a small, square hole we had to crawl through.

The whare raupō sat proudly on the edge of the bush as if it had been there for centuries. Brent and I slept in it on more springy mingimingi. The mossies ate us alive until Nan filled a milk-powder tin with hot coals to put inside the door. We dropped kawakawa leaves on top to smoulder. As the smoke rose, the mossies vanished. Nan said that the whare would probably fall apart before we came back next year. She was right.

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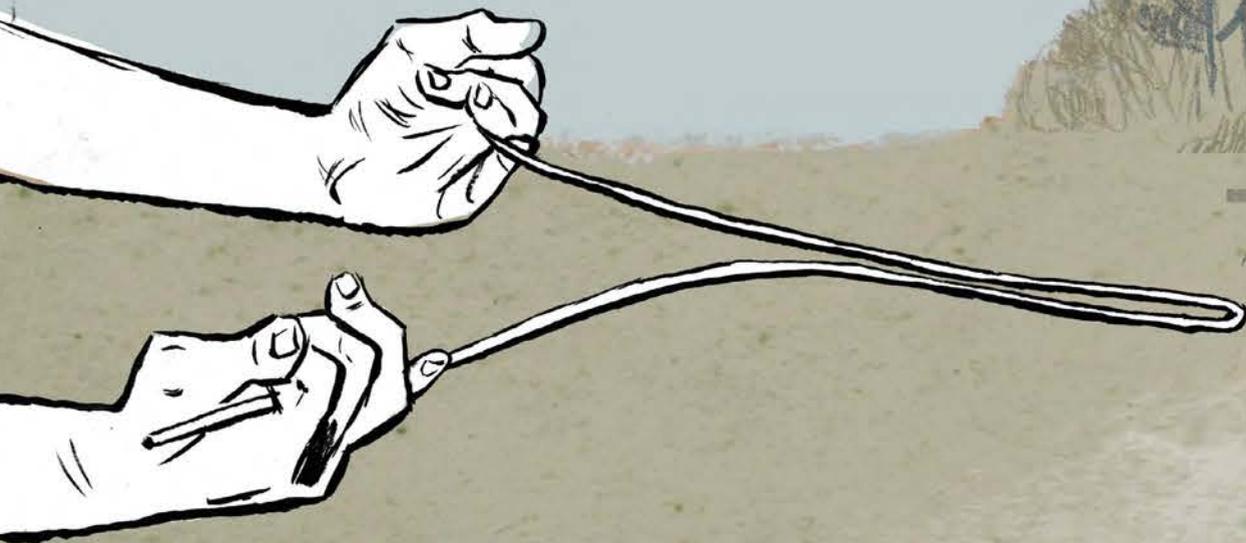
At night, Nan told us stories about her grandparents. They had brought her up and were both great chiefs. The land on the harbour had belonged to them. When Nan was a young woman, they tried to arrange a marriage for her with a man from a chiefly line. She refused and ran away to the Hawke's Bay and married Pop. Or so the story goes.

As a little girl, Nan reckons she saw a moa on the beach. It was blue, bigger than a turkey, and fat like a barrel. The blue turkey barrel hooted at Nan. She followed its tracks along the sand until they disappeared into the bush. I always watched for strange prints after I'd heard that story. I'd listen for hooting in the bush. The moa feathers in museums were brown, but I reckoned those ones were old and faded.

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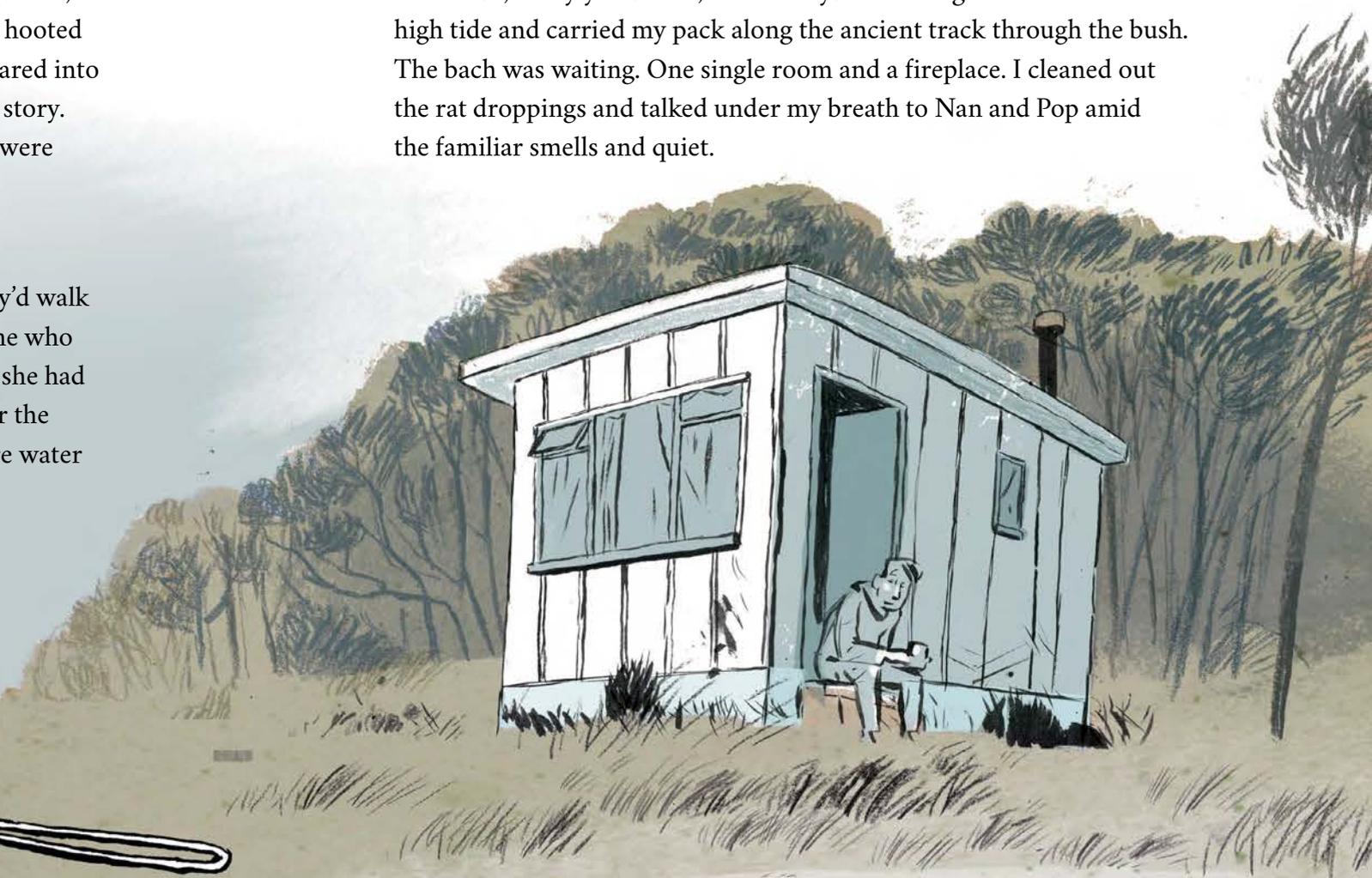
People came to visit Nan. Sometimes they'd row; sometimes they'd walk around on an outgoing tide. Nan would be taken to help someone who was sick. Occasionally she helped people to find water. For this, she had a piece of number eight wire. She held the bent wire loosely over the ground. It would quiver and swing and eventually point to where water flowed or rested underground. Like magic!

\* \* \*



Over the summer, our skin darkened and became crusted with salt. We didn't wash in fresh water, ever, but Nan made us brush our hair. We swam every chance we could. The summer holidays seemed endless. Brent and I grew strong. Nan and Pop taught us how to live well on very little. I didn't understand why it couldn't be that way all the time.

And so, many years later, I found myself heading north. I arrived at high tide and carried my pack along the ancient track through the bush. The bach was waiting. One single room and a fireplace. I cleaned out the rat droppings and talked under my breath to Nan and Pop amid the familiar smells and quiet.



The bach was to be my home. I had the skills. Now that I was captain of my own ship, I was going to stay there as long as I could.

illustrations by Daron Parton

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by Fraser Smith

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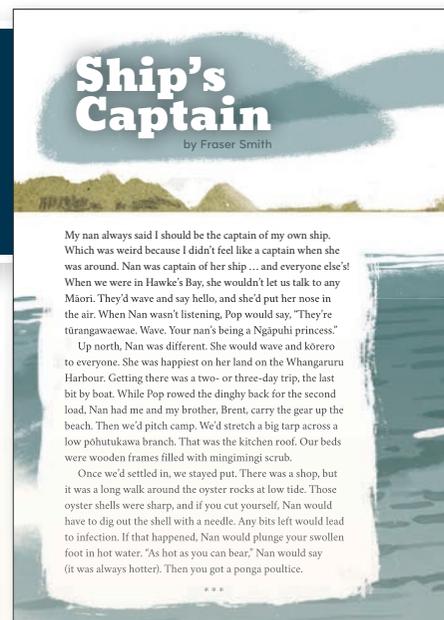
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