



RECKLESS

BY PAUL MASON

Kane took the long way home from school – around the bay. He dragged his feet, putting it off as long as he could. By the old wharf, he stopped to pick out rocks: flat ones for skimming, the stones warm. It took a few tries to get one to jump. The stone leaped over the swell like a kahawai.

Then Kane’s eyes were drawn across the water, out beyond the few boats moored in the bay. Some people were flopping around in the sea by the headland. Shrieking and laughing, the sound carried in broken pieces on the wind. A wave of worry flowed through Kane’s chest. Did they know what was below them, gliding in the shadows?

Kane knew. He’d been out with Uncle Max in his tinny last month. Uncle Max had taken some of his friends fishing. Kane had baited hooks and washed down the boat afterwards for pocket money. When Uncle Max had dropped anchor to gut the fish they’d caught, the sharks came up quick. Maybe four, maybe more – it was hard to tell because they were circling. Bronzies nearly as long as the tinny was wide. Right there, by the headland. Exactly where the swimmers were now.

“Do the sharks always come?” one of Uncle Max’s friends had asked.

“We all clean our fish here,” Uncle Max had replied. “They come.”

Kane felt the fear again. He thought of the way those sharks had made short work of the fish bits. Heads, tails, guts ... all disappearing into gulping mouths. The bronzies had fought, too. Ramming heads, forcing each other out of the water, their powerful tails whipping up the surface. The people out there now had no idea they were swimming in the feeding spot. Of course they didn’t. They weren’t from around here. Their launch was big and white, with flash tinted windows.

Kane waved his arms and called out. Even though he felt stupid, he yelled “Shark!” – like he was in a movie. But the onshore wind pushed against him, and Kane’s words died as soon as they left his mouth. The swimmers couldn’t hear him; hadn’t seen him either. Kane looked for someone to share the worry, but he was alone.

Now he felt angry. Was it his job to warn the visitors? He could walk away, pretend he hadn’t seen them – easy as. That’s what people would expect him to do, right? Kane Smith, always a bit unreliable. A bit reckless. Maybe the bronzies wouldn’t be interested in the swimmers?

Kane shook his head. It wasn’t worth risking.

Maybe he could follow the track out to the headland, then pick his way down the grassy slope. He could call to the swimmers from there. But that would take ages. Kane pictured limbs churning the water. Had the bronzies picked up the splashing yet? Were they already coming?

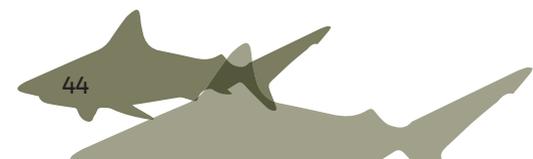
There were half a dozen dinghies upturned at the far end of the bay, chained to trees leaning over the sand. There had to be one that was loose. Then he could get out into the bay. Get close enough to shout.

In the middle of the huddle, there was an old wooden dinghy secured by a greasy rope. Kane flipped it over. The dinghy was pretty beat up, but it looked safe enough. There were oars, along with a life jacket, tucked inside. Kane was pretty sure the owner wouldn't mind – and he'd put the dinghy back exactly like he'd found it. Besides, it would only take ten minutes.

A scream from the bay – a child's scream – caught on the wind and made Kane spin round. He paused, throat tight. But then came laughter. They were all right, still.

Kane dragged the dinghy down to the shore, the cool water splashing over his jandals. He pulled on the life jacket, pushed off, and clambered in. The bay looked heaps bigger from the water. But the oars felt strong in his hands, and Kane leaned forward, then back, feeling them pull through the water. He tried not to think about sharks, their bronze backs arching, pale fins cutting the water ... the slits of their mouths lined with strips of teeth.

Kane looked to see how far he'd come. He was about halfway. The people were still in the water. Kane could see they were a family. A mother and a father and two kids. Just a little farther, then they would hear him. He picked up his pace, finding a rhythm, leading the dinghy through the boats.





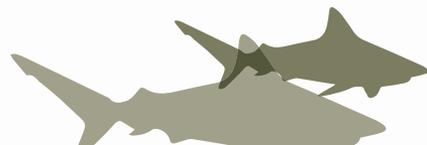
A few more strokes, and Kane turned again. "Hey!" he called. Kane pulled in the oars. "Hey!" he called, louder this time and waving. Now the father raised his arm to wave back. Kane took a deep breath.

"Sharks!" he yelled. He chopped straight arms together like jaws. "Sharks there!"

At first, Kane didn't think they'd understood. Then he saw the father point back to the launch, heard the bark in his voice. The family swam rapidly for the diving platform. Kane watched as they climbed out of the water, the kids hugging themselves with thin arms, the mother quick with the towels. Kane let out a long breath. They were OK.

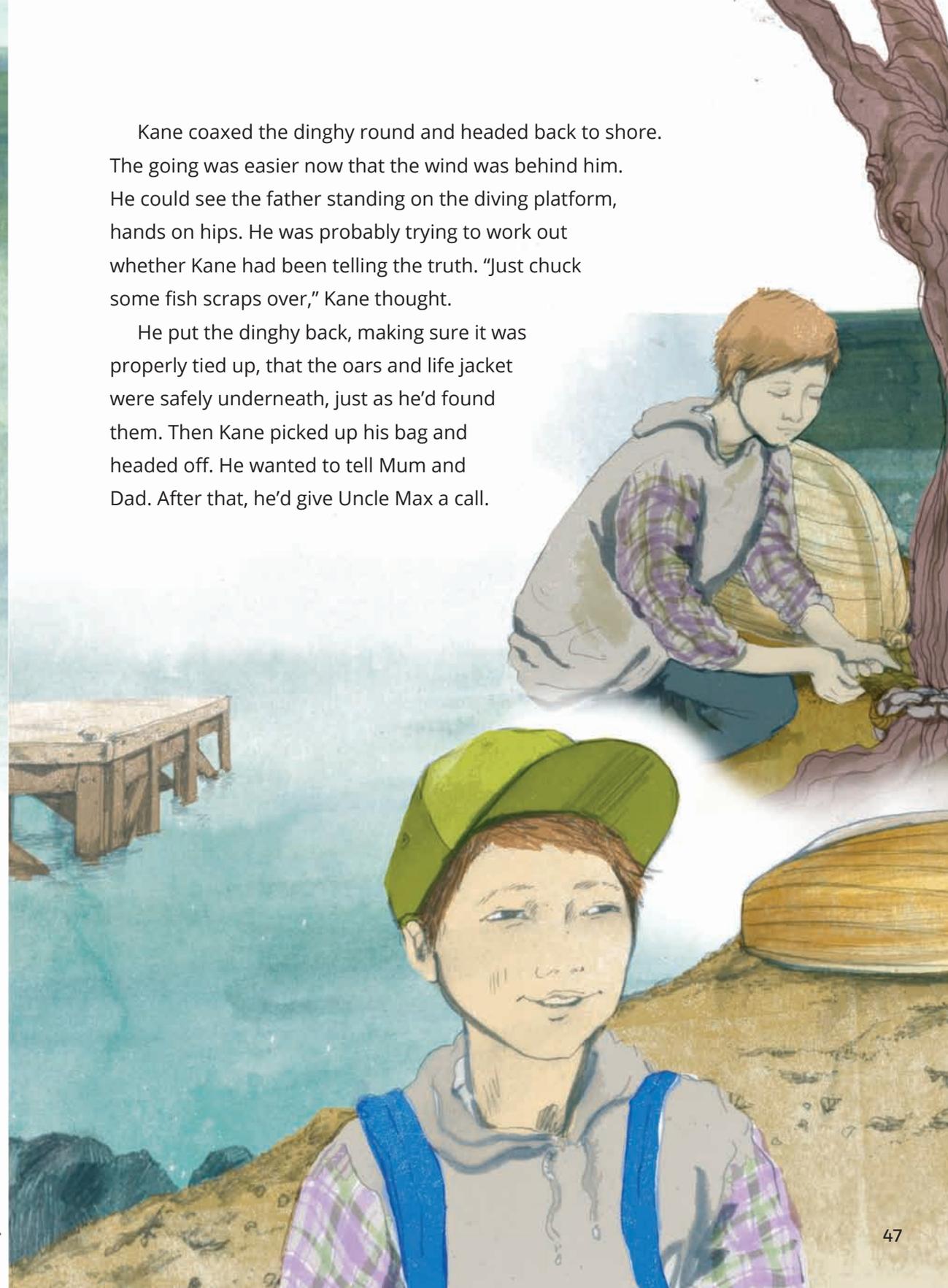
Then the father cupped his hands and called. "Are you sure?"

"Real sure!" Kane yelled back. "Feeding spot," he added. The father nodded.



Kane coaxed the dinghy round and headed back to shore. The going was easier now that the wind was behind him. He could see the father standing on the diving platform, hands on hips. He was probably trying to work out whether Kane had been telling the truth. "Just chuck some fish scraps over," Kane thought.

He put the dinghy back, making sure it was properly tied up, that the oars and life jacket were safely underneath, just as he'd found them. Then Kane picked up his bag and headed off. He wanted to tell Mum and Dad. After that, he'd give Uncle Max a call.



But when he got home, his father didn't want to know. He sat there in his work socks and shorts, holding up a wide hand, killing the stream of words from Kane's mouth. Just like the wind on the shore.

"Let's have it," he said.

"Dad, you should have seen –" but his father shook his head. With a sigh, Kane unzipped his bag and handed over his report.

His father skimmed the cover, then turned to the comments at the back. He finished reading, his jaw clenching a little. Then he dropped the report on the table with a grunt.

Kane hung his head. "Not good?" he asked – even though he could guess.

Dad frowned at him. "When are you going to step up, son?" His voice was weary. "When? That's what I want to know." His father pushed himself up from the table, leaving the report there for Mum to find ... leaving Kane alone in the kitchen, his story about the bronzies already fading.

illustrations by Rebecca ter Borg



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Published 2014 by the Ministry of Education
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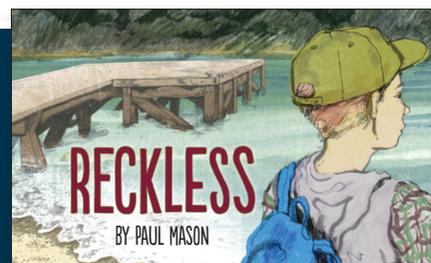
Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 0 478 44623 4 (online)

Publishing services Lift Education E tū
Series Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Liz Tui Morris
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



[New Zealand Government](http://www.govt.nz)



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SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3, NOVEMBER 2014

Curriculum learning area	Health and Physical Education Social Sciences
Reading year level	Year 6
Keywords	responsibility, keeping safe, decisions, sharks, stepping up