

# Staying Afloat

by Feana Tu'akoi



“Are you two ready yet?” called Grandad as he put the last of the gear into the boat.

Vika gave Kele a smug look. “I’m ready, Grandad,” she said, “but Kele hasn’t got his life jacket on.”

Kele glared at her. “I don’t need one. I can swim!”

“You can swim in the swimming pool,” scoffed Vika. “It’s not the same as swimming in the sea.”

Grandad joined in. “The sea’s a bit deeper than the swimming pool,” he said. “Vika’s right. Put your life jacket on.”

Kele made a face. “We’re not going *in* the sea,” he said. “We’re going in a boat *on* the sea.”

“Sorry, buddy,” said Grandad. “When I’m the captain, everyone has to wear a life jacket.”

Kele shoved his arms into the life jacket and did it up. Then he climbed into the boat. “I bet you didn’t wear one when you were a kid in Tonga,” he grumbled.

“Wrong!” laughed Grandad as he started the motor. “I did wear one – and I wasn’t in deep water or even on a boat. I *walked* into the water to catch fish.”

Vika thought for a moment. “I don’t get it,” she said. “Fish won’t stay still while you walk up to them.”

“It wasn’t just me,” he said. “All the men in the village helped. We used a kupenga – a long fishing net.”



Grandad grinned and steered the boat into deeper water. After a while, he checked his GPS and then turned off the motor. "This is it!" he said. "My secret fishing spot!" He lowered the anchor over the side and handed out the rods.

"I still don't get it," said Vika. "How did you catch fish with the kupenga?"

"We dragged it out into the sea and made a huge circle in the water," Grandad said. "Then we walked towards the shore. Lots of fish were trapped inside the circle. When we got the kupenga into shallow water, we could catch the fish easily."

He smiled as he chopped up the bait. "We got enough fish to feed the whole village!" he said.

"Awesome!" said Kele. He pushed some bait onto his hook. Then he looked up. "You wore a life jacket for *that*?" he said, shaking his head. "Everyone would have laughed at you."

"Wrong again," said Grandad. He cast his line out into the sea. "I was a kid, so I had to stay in the shallow water, but my cousin Saia was in the water up to his chest. He was the biggest, strongest man in the village, but he got washed off his feet and swept away."

Kele's eyes grew wide. "What happened to him? Couldn't he swim?" he asked.

"He could swim all right," said Grandad. "But the wave was huge, and he didn't see it coming. He swallowed lots of water. We thought he was going to drown, for sure."

"Was he OK?" gasped Vika.

Grandad nodded. "He was lucky," he said. "Three of my uncles swam out and got him, but it was a close call."



“Woah!” said Kele. “And after that, you always wore a life jacket?”

Grandad nodded. “My auntie sent me one from New Zealand. I thought I was so flash – all the other kids wanted one as well!”

Kele puffed out his chest and struck a pose. “I’m flash, too,” he said.

At that moment, Vika’s fishing line went tight. “Not as flash as me!” she cried. She leaned back, winding her reel furiously. Her rod bent over and her face went scarlet, but finally, she pulled in the fish.

“A snapper!” said Grandad, as he unhooked it. “A big one too!”

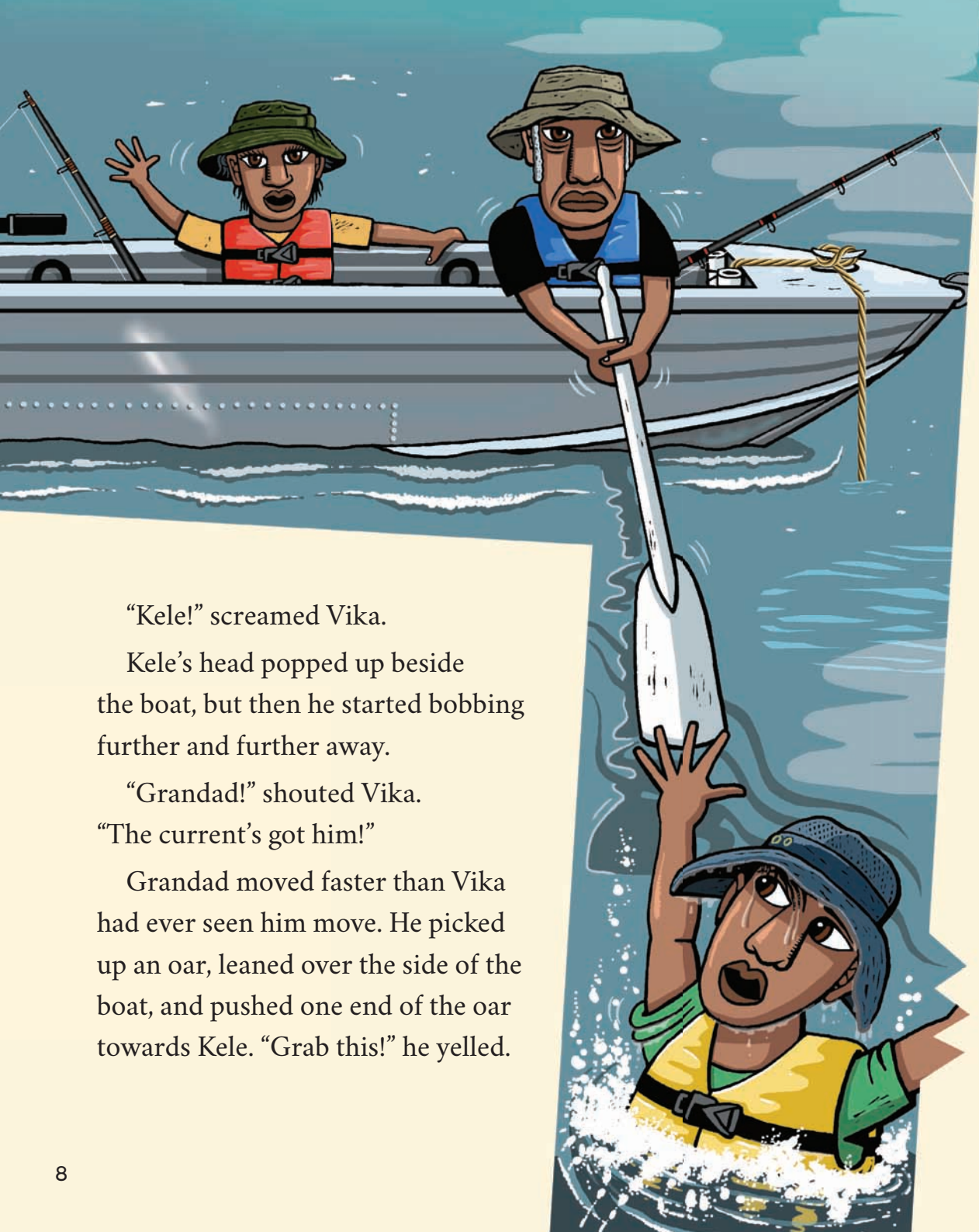
Vika let out a whoop. “Beat this, Kele!” she crowed. “I’m the best fisher in the family.”

Kele scowled and looked down into the water, but no fish came. They were just about to pack up for the day when he finally felt a tug on his rod.

“I’ve got one!” Kele shouted, leaping to his feet and yanking the line.

“Sit down,” warned Grandad, but it was too late. The boat rocked suddenly, and Kele toppled over the side.





“Kele!” screamed Vika.

Kele’s head popped up beside the boat, but then he started bobbing further and further away.

“Grandad!” shouted Vika.  
“The current’s got him!”

Grandad moved faster than Vika had ever seen him move. He picked up an oar, leaned over the side of the boat, and pushed one end of the oar towards Kele. “Grab this!” he yelled.

Kele stretched out an arm and caught hold of the oar. Then Grandad pulled him towards the boat. Once, Kele lost his grip and fell back into the water, but the life jacket stopped him from going under and he managed to catch hold of the oar again.

At last, Grandad grabbed Kele by the life jacket and heaved him back into the boat. Kele was coughing so much that he couldn’t talk.

Grandad was breathing hard. “Lucky you were wearing that life jacket,” he panted.

“I know,” said Kele. Then, suddenly, he started grinning.

“What’s so funny?” yelled Vika. “You nearly drowned!”

“Look!” said Kele. “There’s my rod stuck under the seat. I’ve still got the fish, and I bet it’s way bigger than yours, Vika!”

He reeled in the line until the fish flopped into the boat. Then he flung his arms into the air. “Now who’s the best fisher in the family?” he laughed.



illustrations by  
Fraser Williamson

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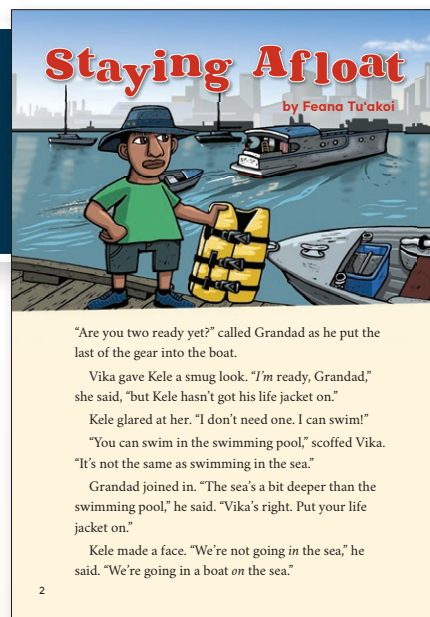
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Published 2017 by the Ministry of Education  
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.  
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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 0 478 16867 9 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū  
Editor: David Chadwick  
Designer: Liz Tui Morris  
Literacy Consultant: Kay Hancock  
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



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## JUNIOR JOURNAL 54

<b>Curriculum learning areas</b>	English Health and Physical Education Social Sciences
<b>Reading year level</b>	Year 3
<b>Keywords</b>	boating, cautionary tales, family, fishing, grandparents, Kele, life jackets, safety, Tonga, Vika, water safety