

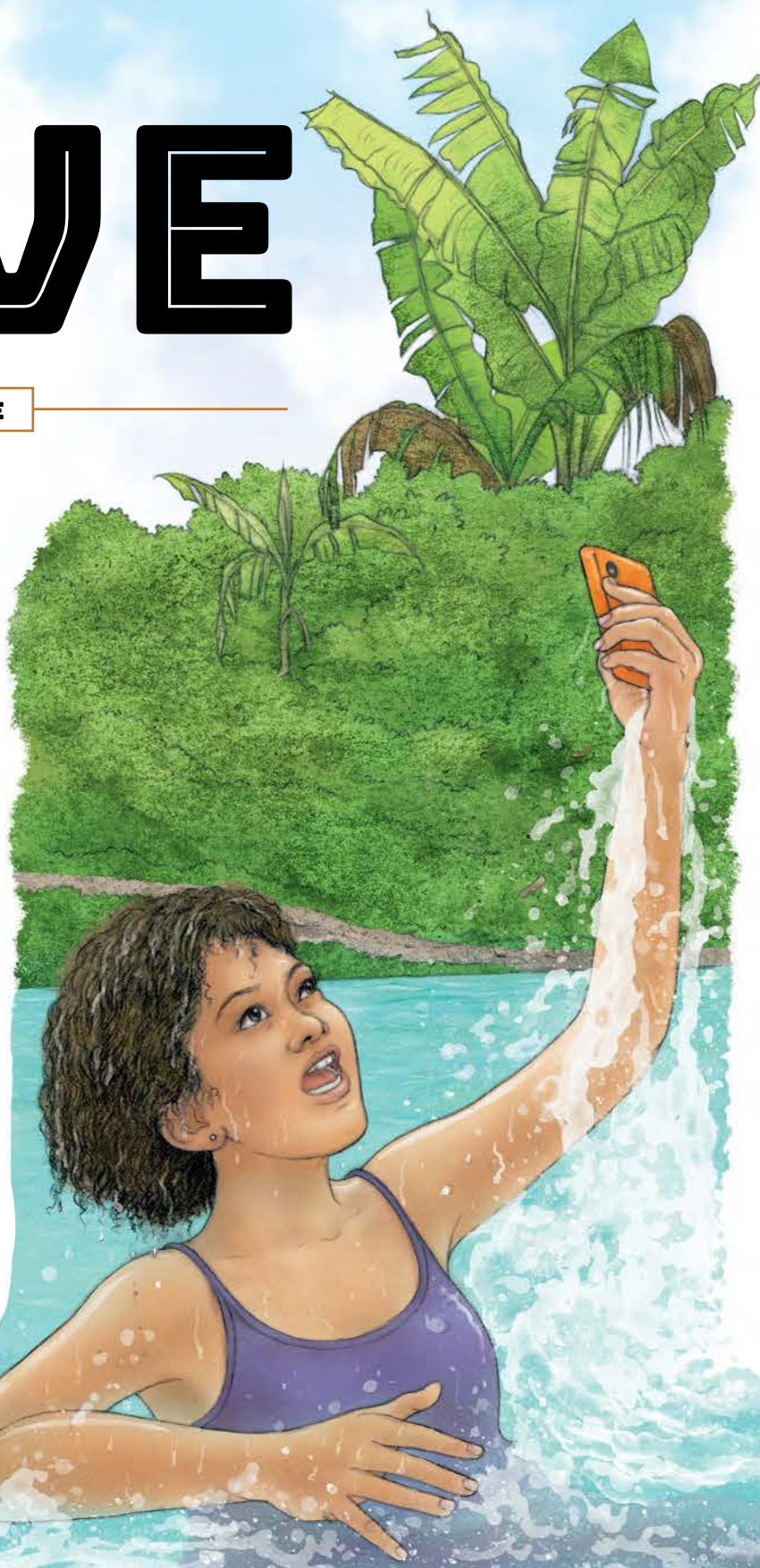
DIVE

BY GINA COLE

It was hotter than the sauna at the Newmarket pool, and I stood on the bank, lost in a daze. My cousin Eddy waited on the opposite side, hands planted on hips. She was different from me, always joking round. Now she squinted in the sun and shook her head, amused. Rivulets of water dripped down her black-brown legs.

“Hurry up, cuz,” she called. “We’ll be late for the lovo – and I’m hungry. I want some kumala.”

The turquoise water was so bright and perfect it looked like a cartoon. Sticks and debris floated on the current. I imagined it carrying me away, too, out into the Pacific. Instead, I took a breath, took my phone from my pocket, and lowered myself into the cool river. I kicked my legs in wide arcs like I did at squad training, but it was an awkward one-handed breaststroke so I could hold my phone up, and soon I was panting. Water slogged into my mouth, and I turned my head. That’s when I saw something moving below me – something long and black and white.



“What’s that stripy thing?” I shouted at Eddy.

“Sea snake. It won’t hurt you.”

“What? No way!”

The snake came towards me, and I shrieked and swam hard for the other side. I hauled myself onto the hot sand and sat there, crying. “I dropped my phone!” I wailed to Eddy. “It’s in the water.”

“How will you hear it ring?” she joked.

I began to cry even harder. How would I talk to Dad? I could hardly borrow Mum’s phone.

Eddy knew some of this stuff, and her expression changed. “I’ll find it,” she said. Before I could reply, she dived in. I shielded my eyes from the glare and scanned the water. Eddy’s head popped up downstream. She took a deep breath and dived back down, legs kicking out behind her. When she reappeared, she’d drifted even further. “Can’t see it,” she shouted.

I ran along the bank, dodging coconut trees. We had to find it. I wasn’t leaving here until we did. Then I spied something orange on the riverbed.

“Over there,” I yelled, pointing.

Eddy dipped below the surface, but she was way off course. Sea snakes or not, I had no choice. I ran at the river and dived in, reminding myself to stay focused. It was something our swimming coach always said. I cut through the water, strong and quick, using a breathing technique I’d just learnt. I grabbed the orange rectangle as it rolled over the sandy bottom and launched myself back up to the surface, punching a handful of water and phone high in the air. There was no dropping it this time.

I dog-paddled with my free hand and kicked out like a demented frog, reaching the golden sand just before the river met the sea. When Eddy spotted me, I was back on the bank, shaking my phone, hoping it would dry out in the hot Fijian sun.

“Wow! Cool dive,” Eddy said. She looked at my phone. “Is it working?”

“It’s meant to be waterproof. It should be OK.”

At that precise moment, the phone rang. We looked at each other, amazed. Eddy started laughing. “Answer it!”

It was Dad, and I felt a weird stab of nerves. We hadn't talked for a week, not since the night Mum and I left Auckland.

"Hey, Dad," I said.

"Hi, Shelly. How's it going? What are you up to?"

"Oh ... nothing. You know, swimming."

"I'm glad you're still training. Have you got a decent-sized pool there?"

"No pool, but I've been in the sea a few times. It's kind of scary. There are sea snakes!"

Dad laughed. "Seriously! Don't worry, I'm sure you can out-swim them."

There was a pause. I could guess what he was going to say next.

"How's your mum?"

Good question. She'd seemed all right yesterday, but I remembered the way she'd been on the flight over. She'd stared out the window, then spent the rest of the time under a blanket. Now, in Fiji, she went for lots of walks and came back with red eyes. And she went to bed way too early, even though my aunts begged her to stay up. But should I tell Dad all this? Would Mum like that?

The silence grew while I stressed over what to say. I finally settled on a half-truth. "Mum's OK."

"That's good," said Dad. "I'd better get back to work. Bye, love. Talk soon."

Eddy was watching me carefully, her usual smirk gone. I could taste salty tears.

"Come on. We can't miss the lovo," she said, reaching down to haul me up.

"They'll be digging it up soon."

We wandered through the cool shade of the trees. There were no schedules here, and I realised I'd begun to love this place: the oily smell of the kerosene lamps at night; trimming bele leaves with my aunts; sitting round on pandanus mats, laughing with my cousins. I missed Dad and our life in Auckland, but I didn't miss everything. Not the rush and stress and fighting. I wondered how to tell Mum about the call. She knew Dad and I chatted. I never hid it from her, although this time, I'd felt impatient to get off the phone – maybe because Mum had seemed a tiny bit happier the last few days. I didn't want to change that.

Eddy followed a track that led to a weatherboard church and a clearing. Underneath a mango tree, my uncles and aunts and Mum were hauling sacks from a smoking hole in the earth. Mum was smiling and speaking Fijian. When we'd first arrived, she'd stumbled over the language. I knew she struggled to remember the words; she hadn't visited her family for a long time.



"There you are!" Mum called. She'd changed out of her frilly church dress and had on a sulu and a pink T-shirt. Her face looked happy and relaxed, as though she'd finally caught up on some sleep. She came over, carrying a steaming barracuda wrapped in foil and some kumala. The sweet potato was hot, and Eddy and I juggled the pieces from hand to hand.

"Sorry I missed the church service," I said.

Mum gave me a knowing look. "You're soaked."

"Eddy and I went for a swim."

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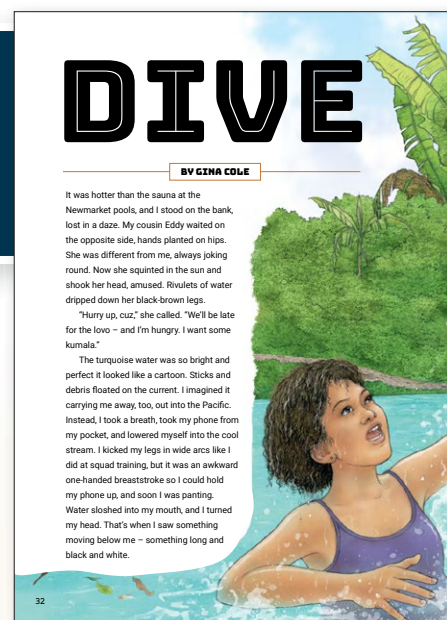
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