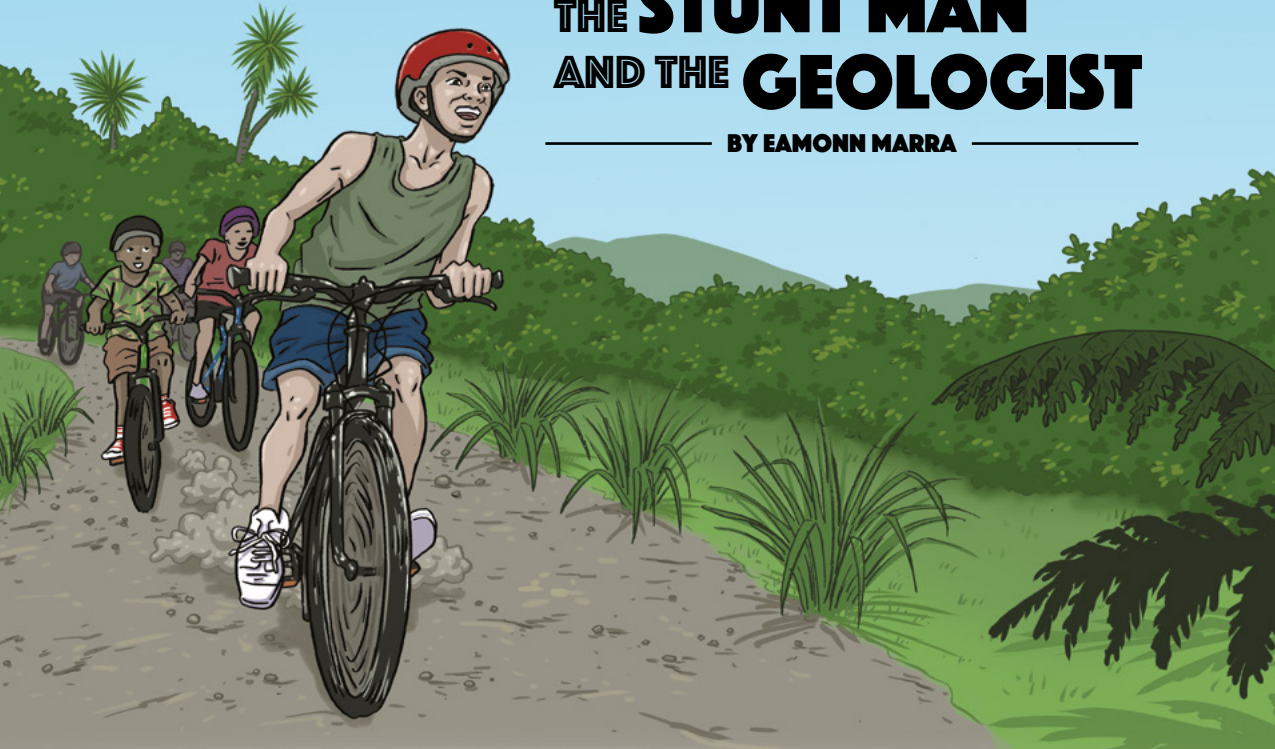


THE STUNT MAN AND THE GEOLOGIST

BY EAMONN MARRA



My older brother, Toby, told the other boys at the campground he was training to be a professional stunt man. He told stories about high school, where he'd been for a year, though you'd swear it was forever the way he talked. Toby said he learnt martial arts and stunt falls in PE. I knew he was exaggerating, but if I agreed, it made me the second-coolest kid there.

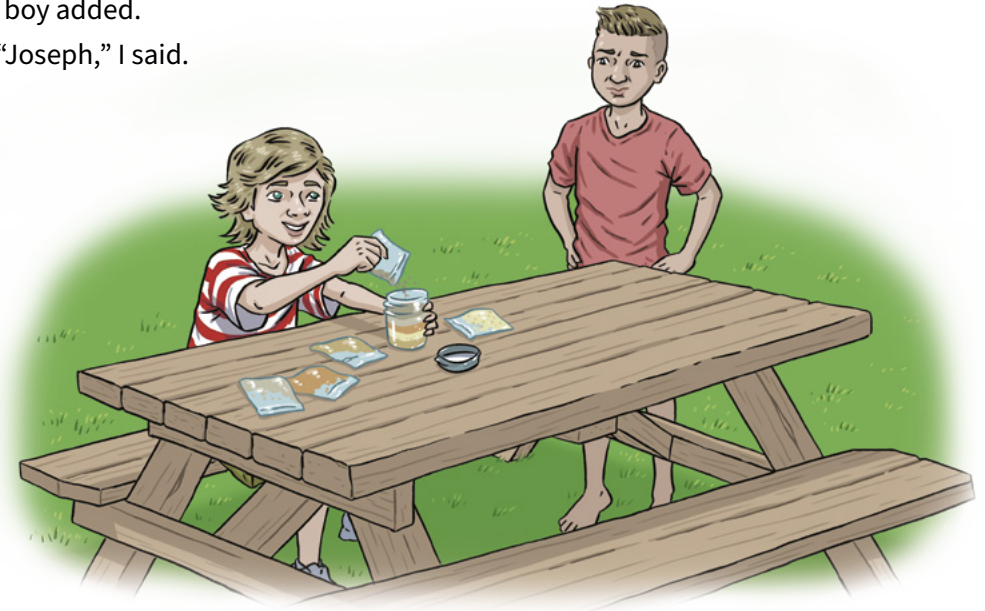
Toby spent his days biking the tracks in the nearby forest. His boys followed him everywhere, keeping their distance as he skidded round corners and sent dust flying. He was trying to make up for his bike being second-hand. After dinner, when the little kids had gone to bed, Toby and the others would take over the playground: Toby on the tramp, the rest of them hanging about, watching him do flips. He claimed he could do double flips but the "crappy tramp" didn't give him enough air. Sometimes he'd get me to help demonstrate wrestling moves. He'd start by knocking me over. I'd fall dramatically. Then he'd pin me down. He had names for his moves – the Gut Wrench, the Triple Pincer – but they were all variations of Toby wrapping his legs round mine and pressing his elbow into my side. It didn't hurt if I went along with him, but if I tried fighting back, he'd tighten his grip just enough for it to start hurting.

On the fourth day, a family set up next to us. There was a boy who looked about the same age as me. I noticed him sitting at the picnic table, surrounded by little plastic bags. He was pouring sand into a jar.

"What's with the sand?" I asked.

"It's from the lake," the boy said, clearly pleased I'd noticed. "Each colour comes from a different geological period." He screwed on the lid and handed me the jar. The sand had distinct layers: grey, yellow, white, black, and red. "I'm Elliot," the boy added.

"Joseph," I said.



"The lake weathered down different rocks at different times," Elliot explained. "If you dig around a bit, you can find all of them."

"Cool," I said.

Toby had noticed the new kid, too, and came over on his bike. "What's with all this stuff?" he asked. He reached over and picked up the bag of yellow sand. "Looks like fancy dirt."

"It's sand," Elliot said. "From the lake. If you dig into the –"

"Yeah, yeah," Toby said even though I knew he'd be interested. He'd collected rocks in year 6, but now he was all about mountain bikes and martial arts and stunts. Last year, it had been bass guitar. "Fancy dirt, like I said. Got it." Toby biked off. His fans were waiting.

"See you later, Elliot," I said, and I ran to get my bike.

Elliot turned up in the playground that night. Instead of sitting on the swings or slide, he chose one of the boulders. He held a black cylinder thing up to his eye and was looking at a small rock he'd found.

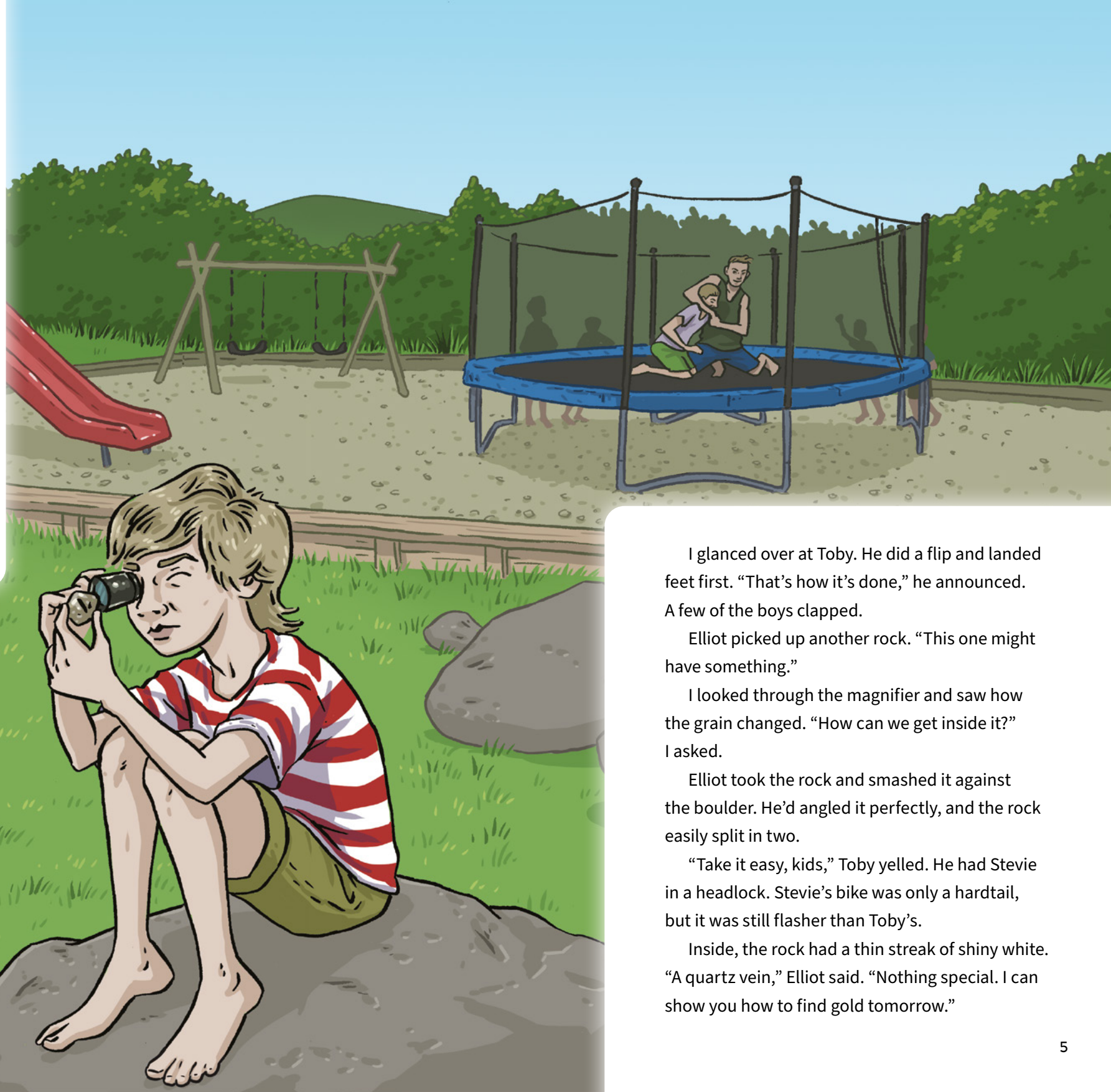
"The sand man has joined us!" Toby yelled from the tramp. Then he demonstrated the Stomach Buster. He'd learnt the move last night online. His fist pushed a little too hard into my gut, so I jumped off and went over to Elliot.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Looking for irregularities with my magnifier," he said. "There could be something inside."

"What ... like gold?" I asked.

"Unlikely, though there was gold round here. We're more likely to find quartz. Want a look?"



I glanced over at Toby. He did a flip and landed feet first. "That's how it's done," he announced. A few of the boys clapped.

Elliot picked up another rock. "This one might have something."

I looked through the magnifier and saw how the grain changed. "How can we get inside?" I asked.

Elliot took the rock and smashed it against the boulder. He'd angled it perfectly, and the rock easily split in two.

"Take it easy, kids," Toby yelled. He had Stevie in a headlock. Stevie's bike was only a hardtail, but it was still flashier than Toby's.

Inside, the rock had a thin streak of shiny white. "A quartz vein," Elliot said. "Nothing special. I can show you how to find gold tomorrow."



The next morning, Elliot asked if I wanted to go sluicing. I must have looked confused. “Gold panning in the stream,” he explained. He had a map marked with red circles. He said it showed places where minerals might have built up. His dad had given him a wok. We could use it for panning as long as we had it back by dinner.

We walked to the closest point on the map – a stream I’d seen the day before. Elliot showed me how to scoop sand and stones from the bottom, then shake out the light stuff, leaving the heavier stuff behind. We didn’t find gold, but we did find tiny flakes of some kind of translucent rock that had different colours. Elliot put some in a bag. “Mica and quartz,” he said. “They’re not worth anything, but I still collect them.”

“You two are little year sixes playing treasure hunters,” Toby said at dinner.

“We’re looking at rocks,” I said. “It’s science.”

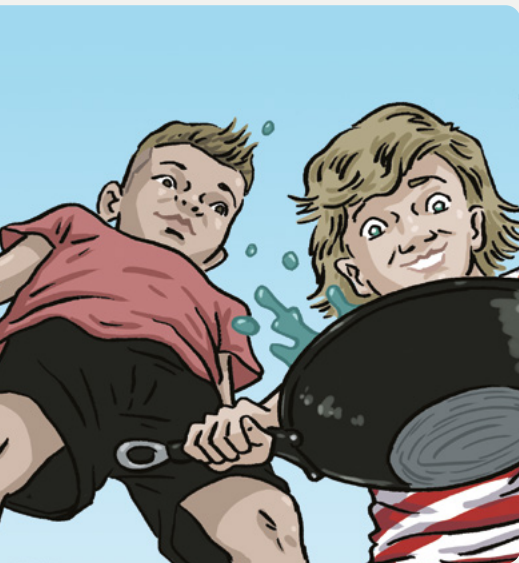
“Year sixes playing scientists then,” he said.

When Elliot showed up at the playground that night, I stayed away from him. Instead, I let Toby push me over with a Cobra Sweep. He followed up with an Anaconda Grip, both new moves. Dad had shared his free data hour again.

Elliot arrived with his wok the next day while we were still eating breakfast. Dad was cooking pancakes while Mum had a sleep-in.

“I’m gonna go biking today,” I told Elliot. “Maybe I’ll pan tomorrow.”

I went off with Toby and his gang. Earlier in the week, I’d been near the front of the pack, but this time, I found myself at the back.



On our way past the stream, we saw Elliot. He was crouched in the gravel, panning. Toby saw his chance. He stood on his pedals and biked hard before suddenly braking. He almost spun 360, throwing pebbles and dirt over Elliot before taking off, laughing. “Sorry, sand man,” he called.

Elliot wiped his face. “Want to hang out?” he asked.

I stood there for a bit, trying to decide. I could see the boys in the distance. “Sorry, Elliot,” I said.

Dad made us do the dishes that night. When we finally got to the playground, Elliot was there, bouncing on the tramp alone. The others had been hanging back, waiting for Toby. None of them were pleased to see Elliot.

“Get off!” yelled James. He had the fanciest bike in the campground. Then Stevie threw some bark – but Elliot carried on jumping.

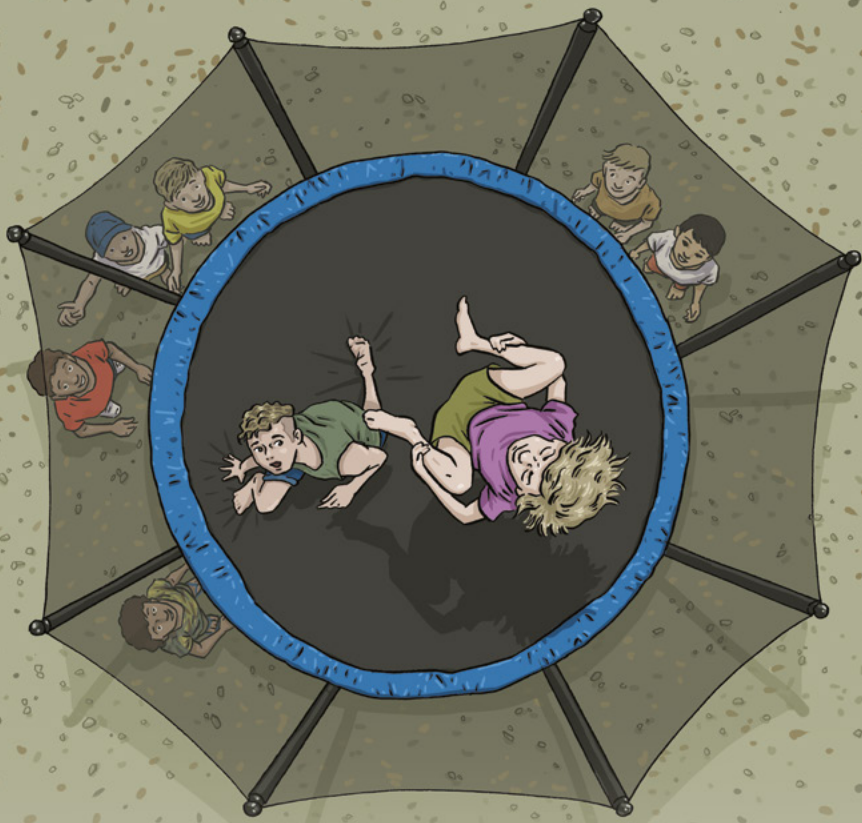
“The sand man doesn’t know his place,” Toby said.

I took the bark from Stevie and threw it on the ground. “Come on, Elliot,” I called. “We can look for more quartz.”

Elliot ignored me.

Toby climbed on the tramp and started to jump, too. He was aggressively close to Elliot. They moved in unison, eyeballing each other, going higher and higher. Toby cracked a smile and began to bounce harder and faster, out of sync with their rhythm – but Elliot didn’t stop.





Then Toby did a massive jump, landing a split second before Elliot. When Elliot hit the tramp, he went flying. His body curled high in the air as he went into a controlled spin. He turned, head over heels, once, twice, before making the perfect landing.

They stopped bouncing, and everyone was quiet for a moment. “A double flip,” whispered James.

Elliot picked up his magnifier, which had fallen out of his pocket.

Toby stood there, slack-jawed. “Where did you learn that?” he asked.

“Gymnastics,” said Elliot.

“Show me how,” Toby said.

“Maybe another time,” Elliot said. “I want some sleep. I’m going panning in the morning.” He looked at me. “Want to try that other sluicing spot tomorrow, Joseph?”

In the silence, I could hear the sound of the stream. There was still a small chance we’d find gold. “Yeah,” I said. “Sure.”

The Stunt Man and the Geologist

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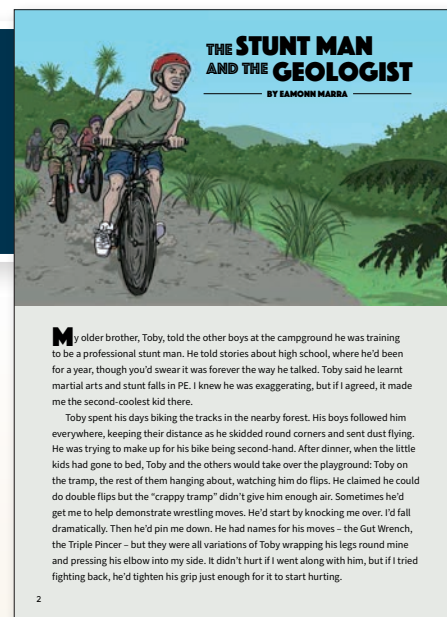
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