

STOP/GO

BY DAVID GEARY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIRIAMA GRACE-SMITH



School Journal Story Library is a targeted series that supplements other instructional series texts. It provides additional scaffolds and supports for teachers to use to accelerate students' literacy learning.

STOP/GO has been carefully levelled. While the contexts and concepts link to English and social sciences at level 4 of the curriculum, the text has a reading year level of years 5 to 6.

Teacher support material (available at www.schooljournalstorylibrary.tki.org.nz) contains key information to help teachers to provide the additional support and scaffolding that some students may need to meet the specific reading, writing, and curriculum demands of *STOP/GO*.

Author's note

Growing up in the Manawatū high country, I remember watching the roadworks when the highway was being straightened near Taihape. I loved seeing the seashell fossils that the diggers unearthed – proof that the land was once underwater and the North Island was indeed Maui's fish! Many years later, I heard a "true story" about a car that was steam-rolled and buried under State Highway 1 near Taihape. Now, whenever I drive through the "Gumboot Capital of the World", I imagine this strange new fossil and how it might have ended up there ... or not.

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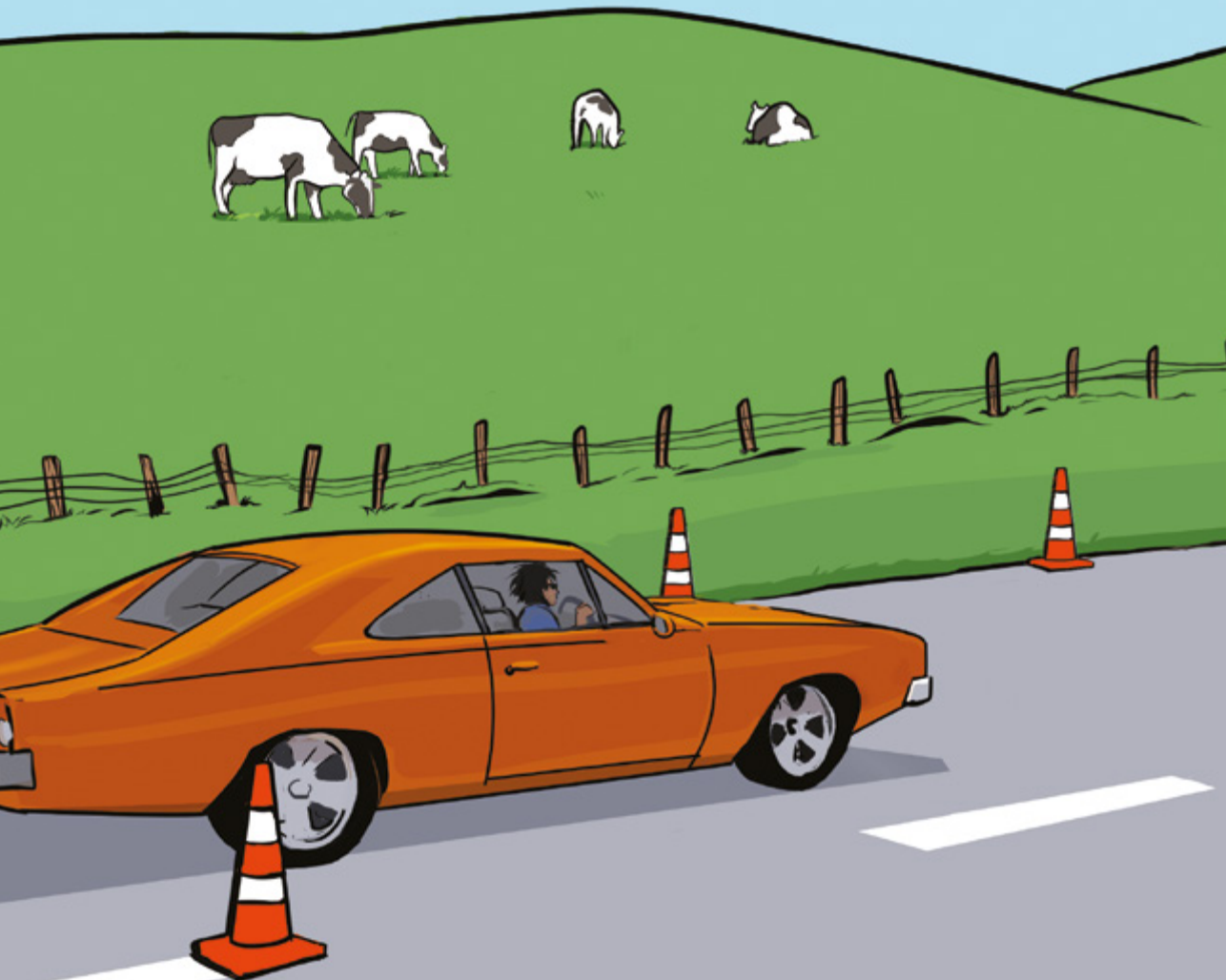
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You've seen me heaps but never given me a second thought. **\$TOP/GO**. The person holding the sign at the roadworks – that's me. Sun baking my brain in a hard hat, sweat dripping down my back, my socks soaking in my steel caps. I play games to stay awake – picking the make of cars as they come out of the mirage.

An old-school car approaches ... 1970s ... Valiant Charger ... moving fast. **\$TOP!** The driver's wearing black shades.

"How long? Over," I ask Hayley over the RT. She's working the sign at the opposite end of the works.



“Not sure,” she replies. “They’re still digging the hole.”

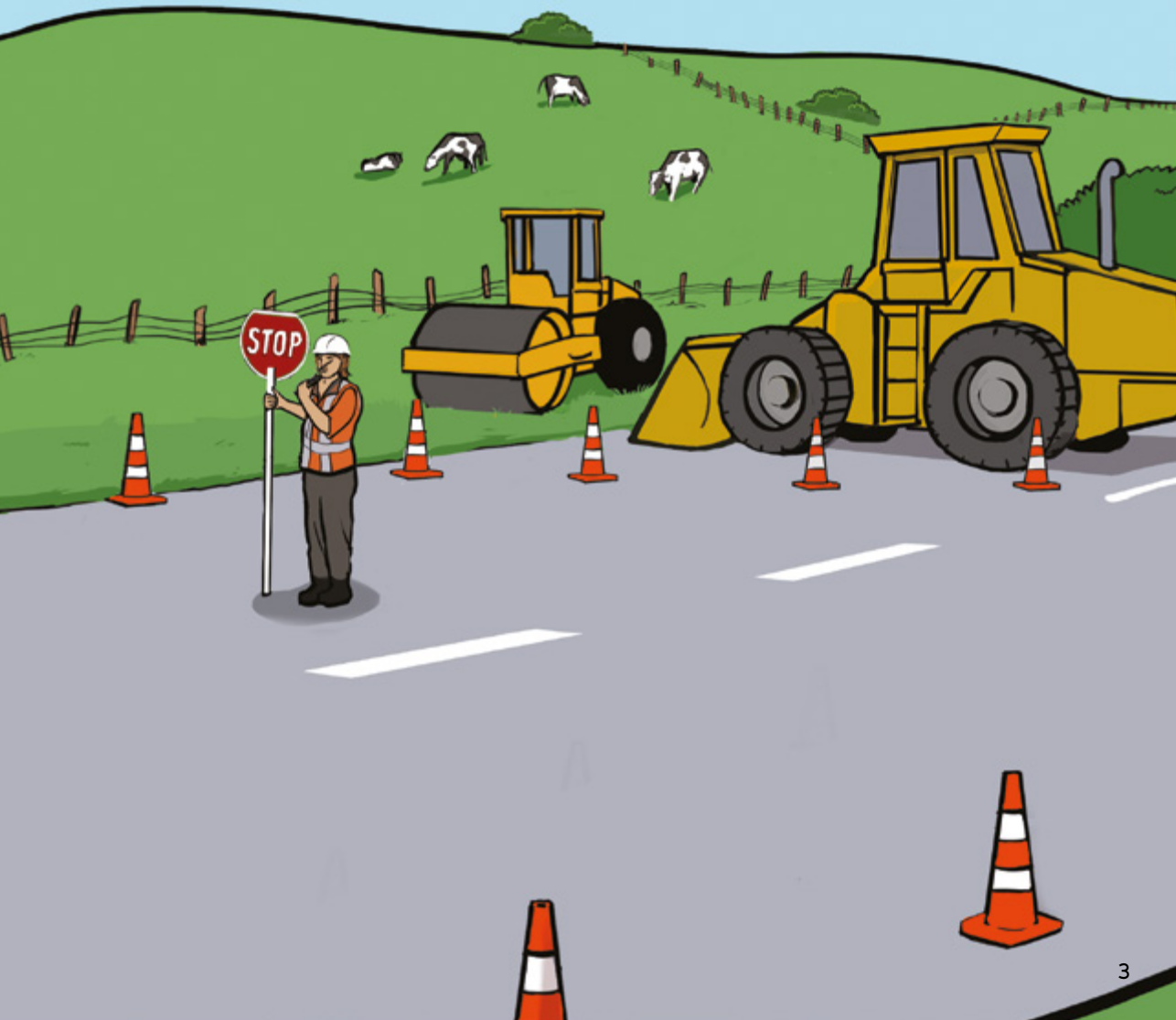
Dude with the shades revs his engine, cranks down his window, and cranks up the tunes. Heavy metal.

My RT crackles. It's Uncle Frank. He's the foreman – and the reason I have this summer job. “OK, Hayley and Luke. Let 'em go. Luke first.”

“Roger, copy that,” I reply. “Over!”

This always makes Hayley laugh, but that's what you're supposed to say.

GO.



The Charger chugs past real slow. Shades gives me the eyebrow salute, then plants his boot. The car skids away, all dust and stones and electric guitars.

BANG!



Gunshot from the Charger? Nah, Shades has just blown a tyre. Serves him right. His car flaps on, shredding rubber.

“What the heck was that?” asks Uncle Frank over the RT.

“Dude in a Charger blew a tyre,” I explain. “Over.”

Shades pulls over, jumps out, kicks the tyre, checks the boot ... slams it shut.



“What’s up?” asks Hayley.

“Bit of drama,” I reply. “Dude with the shades has blown a tyre, and I don’t think he has a spare. Some of the crew are going to help, but Uncle Frank’s warning them off. Looks like he and Shades know each other.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Body language – it’s pretty tense. I think Shades wants a tow, but Uncle Frank keeps waving him away. Lots of angry gestures. Woah! Now Uncle’s storming off! It’s a total crack-up. Over.”

Uncle Frank goes back to the crew, and Shades jacks up his car. He takes off the flat tyre and rolls it south.

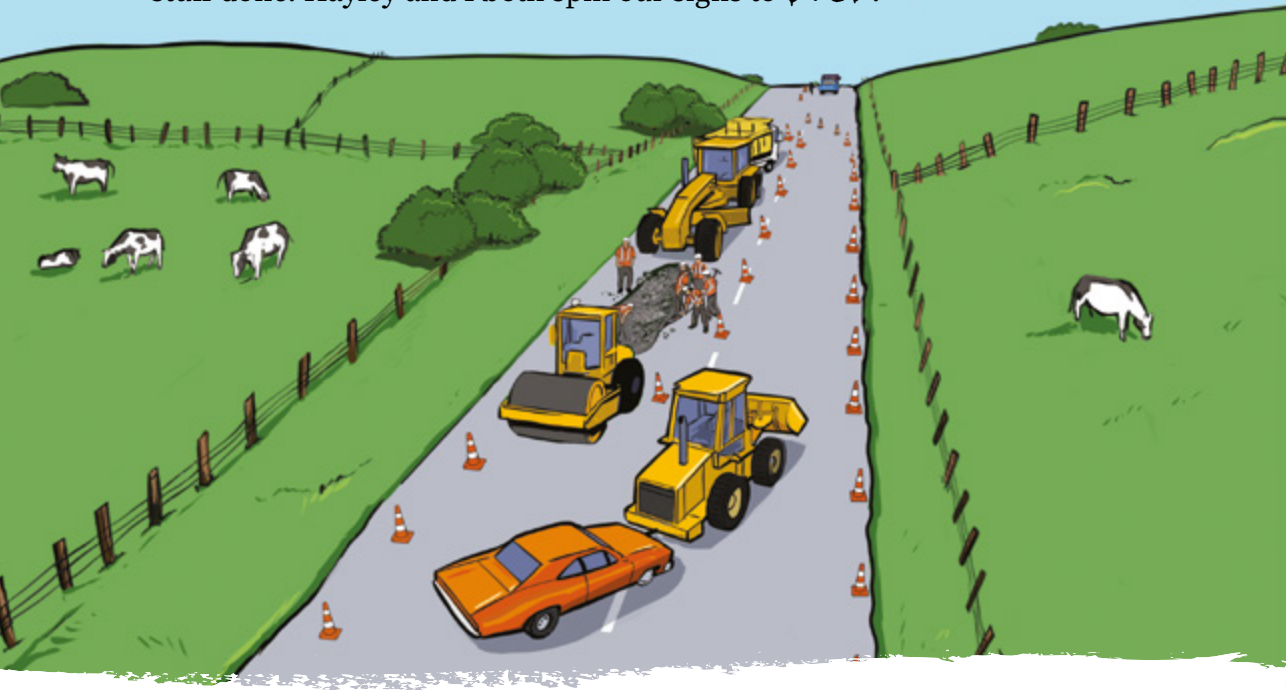
“Hayley, incoming!” I warn.

“Got him in my sights,” she replies. “Oh, yeah, that dude. I went to school with his brother. Can’t someone give him a ride to the garage?”

Uncle Frank interrupts over the RT. You never know when he’s tuning in. “We’re too busy, Hayley. You included. Get this traffic through, then I want a code brown.”



Code brown means shut it down. You know the one – when a toddler drops a log in the pool and the whole place is closed off. It’s the same on a road crew. No rogue floaters, but an empty road makes it easier to get stuff done. Hayley and I both spin our signs to **STOP**.



While the road is clear, Uncle Frank hops on the loader, picks up the Charger, and tows it away.

“Hayley, where’s Uncle going?” I ask.

“Not sure ...,” she replies. “I can’t really see him.” Then we hear another engine starting. “Hold up, what’s that?”

“Sounds like the road roller.” I pause. “He wouldn’t.”

“He would! Your uncle’s mean as,” says Hayley. “He’s going to flatten the Charger and stick it in the hole!”

“Seriously?”

BEEP! HONK! We’ve got two lines of cars in 30-degree heat – steaks sizzling on a hot plate. Uncle Frank’s back on his RT. “Clear! Let ’em through.”

I let the cars **GO**.

“Hayley, can you see the Charger?” I ask.

“Nope, it’s gone!” she says. “Frank’s buried it under the highway!”

“Whoa. Shades must’ve done something real bad to deserve –”

“No one deserves that. Over.”

Then Hayley stops talking to me. My brain starts buzzing real bad, thinking about adults with their grudges and paybacks. I try getting Hayley back on the RT.

“So what do you think went down between them?” I ask. “Was it over money? Girlfriends? Cars? A bet? Or maybe they just didn’t like the look of each other ... that happens ... Hayley? You there?”

There’s a long pause, then at last she replies. “I don’t know, Luke! Sometimes dudes are just dumb. And do dumb dude stuff. Like ask too many dumb questions. Get it?”

“... Got it.”

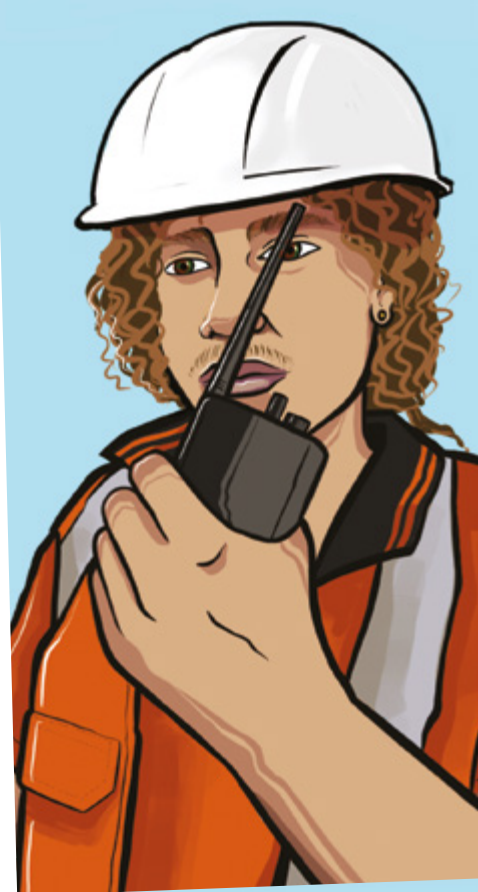
When Shades finally reappears, he’s rolling a pumped-up tyre. He’s looking pretty pumped up, too. Uncle Frank’s on the grader, pretending not to notice. Shades scans the area, but he can’t see his car. He picks up the tyre and marches up to Uncle Frank. More angry gestures. Looks like Uncle’s playing dumb.

“Luke, what’s up?” Hayley asks.

“More drama,” I reply, but I can’t talk for long. “Got to go. Shades is coming this way.”

“Leave your RT on,” says Hayley. “Please.”

I leave it on so she can eavesdrop.





“Hey, little man,” says Shades. “Your boss reckons some of my mates turned up, changed my tyre, and drove off in my car. That true?”

“Um ... what was your car?” My voice wobbles.

“You know.”

“I see a lot of cars.”

“Orange ... Charger,” he says, real slow.

I spy Uncle Frank over Shades’s shoulder, giving me the evils.

“Um ... yeah ... I think I did see something like that.”

Shades stares me down, then shakes his head. He jerks the tyre straight up with one arm. He’s ripped. Is he going to biff it at me? Nah. He slings it over the fence. It bounces like a lamb out of the shearing shed, rolls way out into the paddock, then circles around and falls over. The cows have a sniff. One licks it and moos. I don’t speak moo. Cows are weird.

“You fullas will keep,” mutters Shades. With a last glance back at Uncle Frank, he stomps off down the road. I watch him melt into the haze.

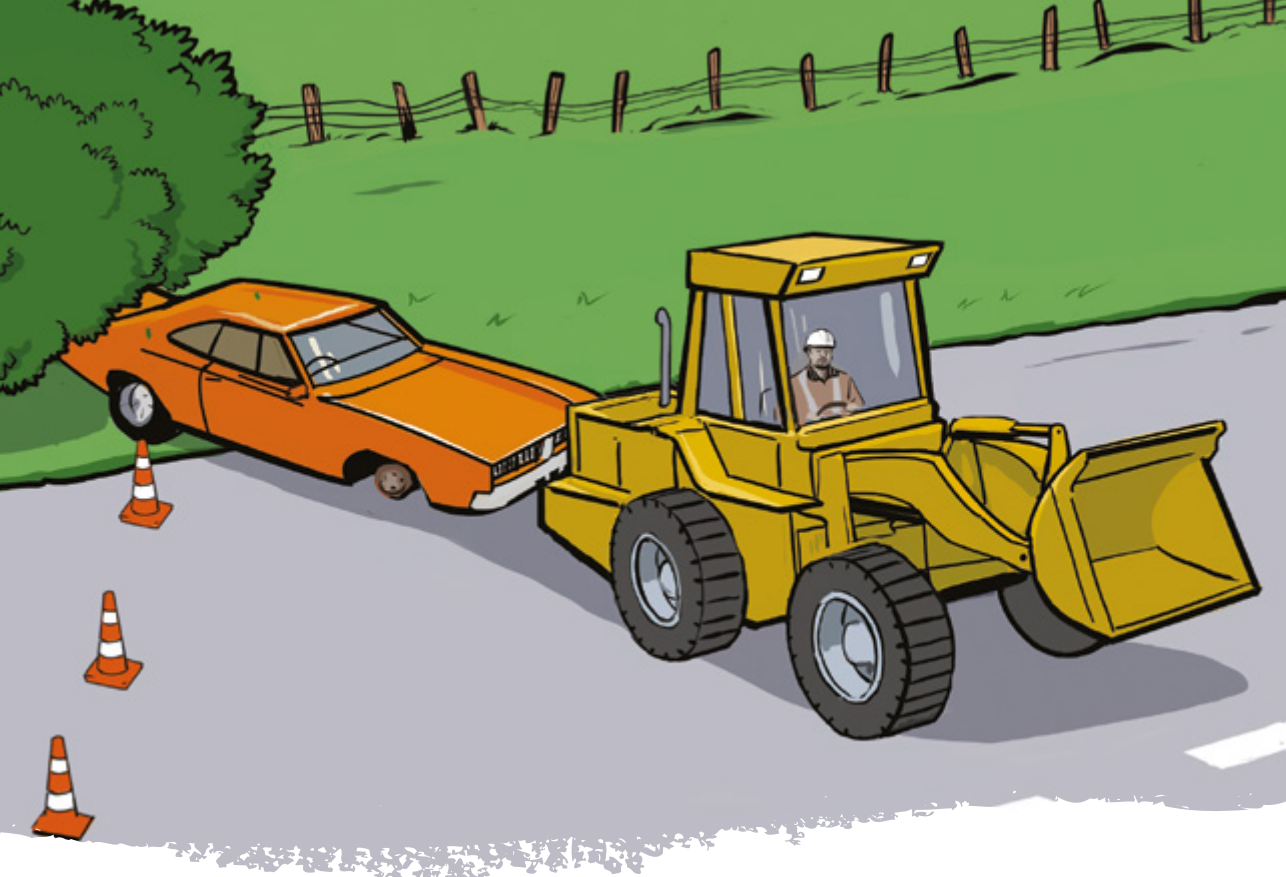
“Great day’s work, boys!” yells Uncle Frank. “Time to knock off and hit the pub. My shout.”

No one seems keen. Uncle’s gone too far with the whole Shades thing, but he’s way too pleased with himself to notice. He strolls over. “What did you tell that fulla about his car?” he asks.

“Nothing,” I mumble.

We both know the code: what happens on a road crew stays on a road crew. Uncle Frank nods, pleased, just as Hayley runs up.





“Hey, what happened to that dude’s car?” she asks. She’s right in Uncle Frank’s face.

“Nothing,” he says. “It’s over there.”

We turn to see one of the crew towing the orange Charger out from behind a bush. He puts it back exactly where Shades left it. So it was all just a joke?

“What’s life if you can’t have a bit of a laugh, eh?” Uncle Frank snickers. “You want a ride home, Luke?”

“Um ...,” Now I’m getting the evils from Hayley. “I might go with Hayley.”

“Suit yourself,” he replies. “And, Hayley, don’t sweat it. I got that fulla’s number. I’ll let him know his car’s here.”

“You two got history?” she asks.

“Nah.” Obviously they do, but Uncle’s not telling. He bounces away like the tyre over the fence. A happy man.

“That was weird,” I say.

“Yeah, your uncle is weird – and mean,” says Hayley. “I bet he doesn’t call Shades. And you can’t leave a classic car like that out here. Go get the wheel.”

“What?” I don’t want to help Shades. He’s mean, too. “Nah,” I say. “He called me ‘little man.’”

“Luke, that dude ... he’s your father.”

She lets it hang there till my hot sweat goes cold.

“What?” I say.

“Nah, kidding. I’ve just always wanted to say that Star Wars line. See! Getting pranked isn’t so funny. Unless ...,” She sees the look on my face.

“Woah, do you really not know who your dad is?”

“Shuddup!”



I climb the fence and shoo the cows. They stare (weird cows, hate cows). I heave the tyre back over the fence and do the dangerous dance around the barbed wire without ripping my jeans. By the time I get back to the Charger, Hayley’s ready with the spanner.



“Need a hand?” I ask.

“Nah.”

“You should tighten the nuts some more once you drop the jack,” I say. “Uncle Frank told me that.”

“Uncle Frank ... right,” says Hayley. “Maybe he’s your dad.”

“Shuddup!”

“See! Still not funny! You tighten the nuts; I’ll start her up.” She pulls a key out of her pocket.

“Eh?” I ask.

“It was still in the ignition. Guess Shades figured no one was taking it anywhere.”

The Charger starts first time.

“You want to drive the beast or follow in my car?” Hayley asks.

“Hold on. What’s the plan?”

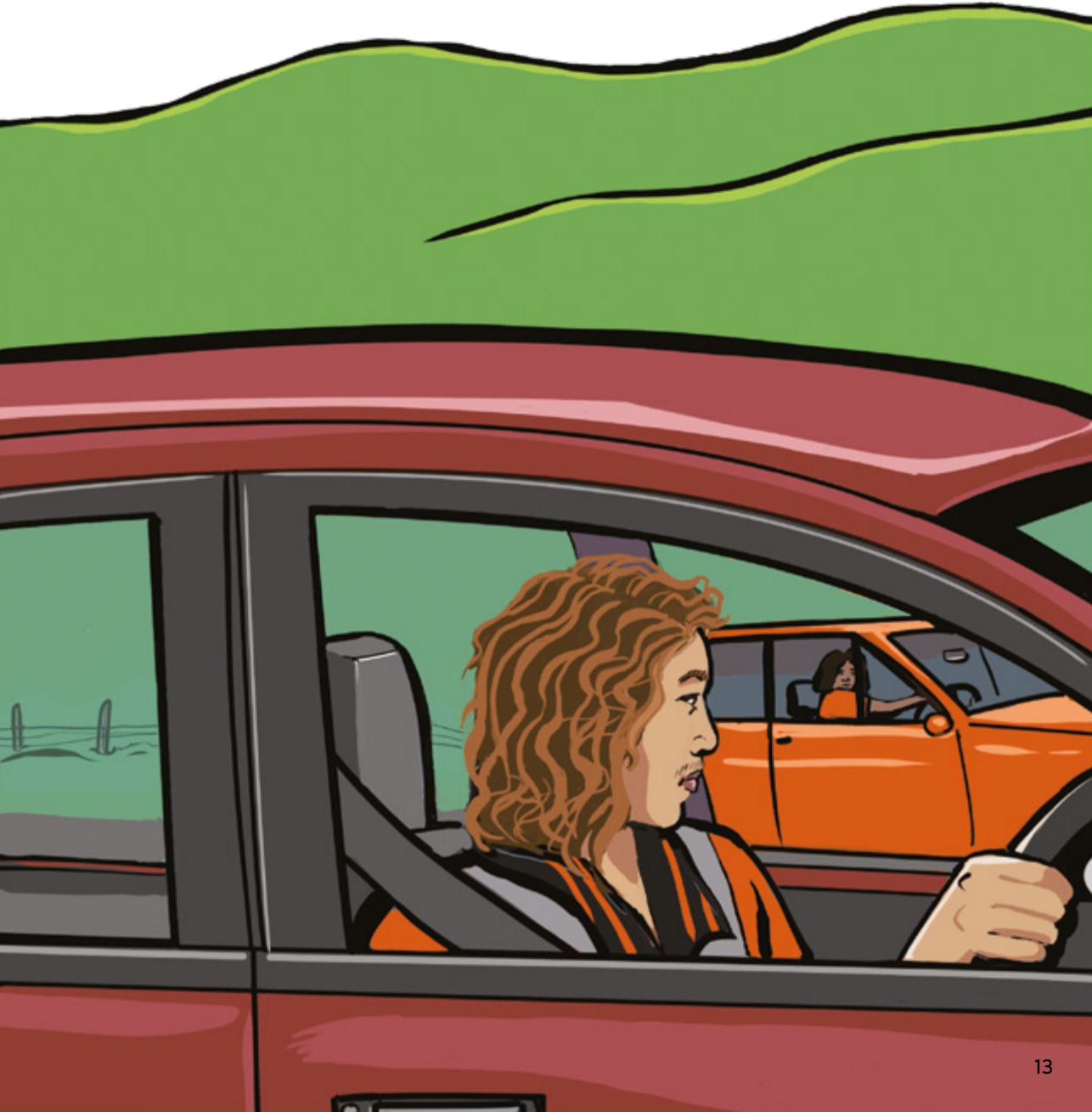
She makes the decision for me. “Simple,” she says, tossing over her keys. “Follow me.”

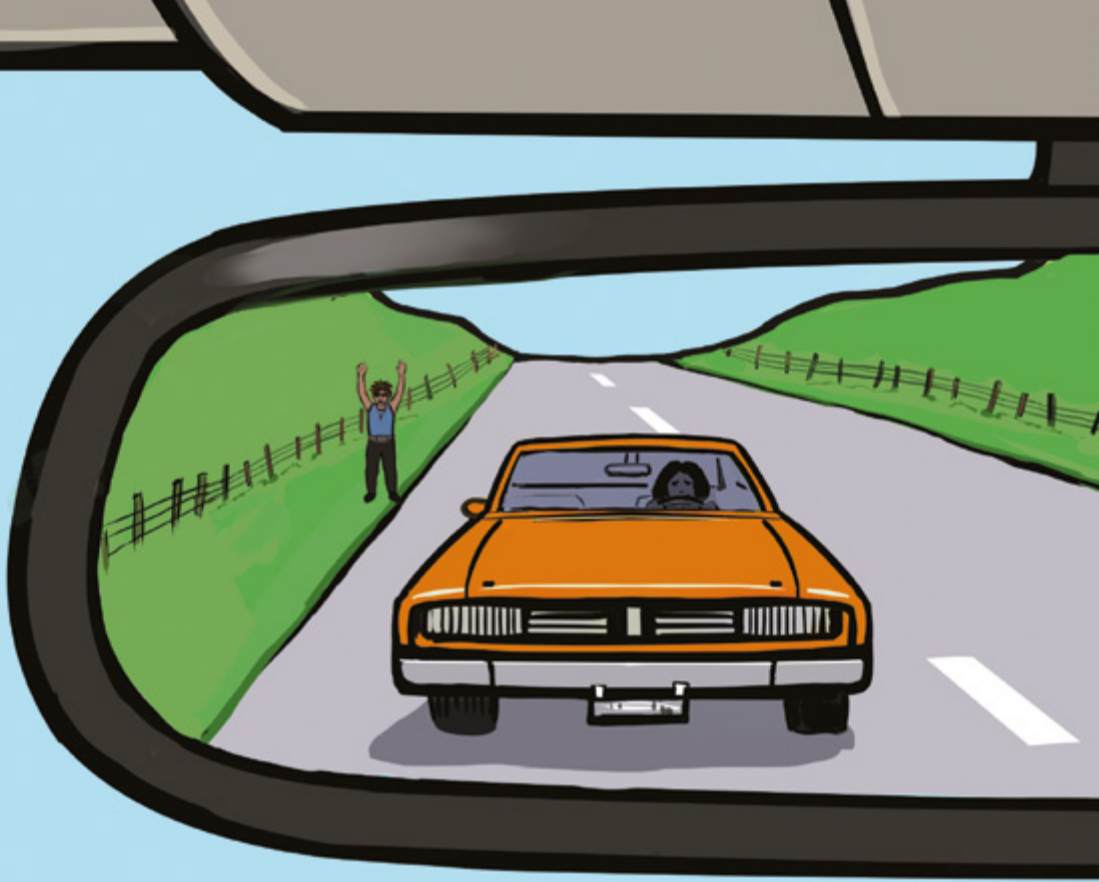
Hayley gets into the Charger and takes off. She hoons it. When I finally catch up, she's idling on the side of the road. Shades is just visible up ahead, striding back into town.

I pull up beside her and wind down the window. "What do we do now?"

"We return the Charger," she says, nodding towards Shades.

"Drive past him and wait for me."





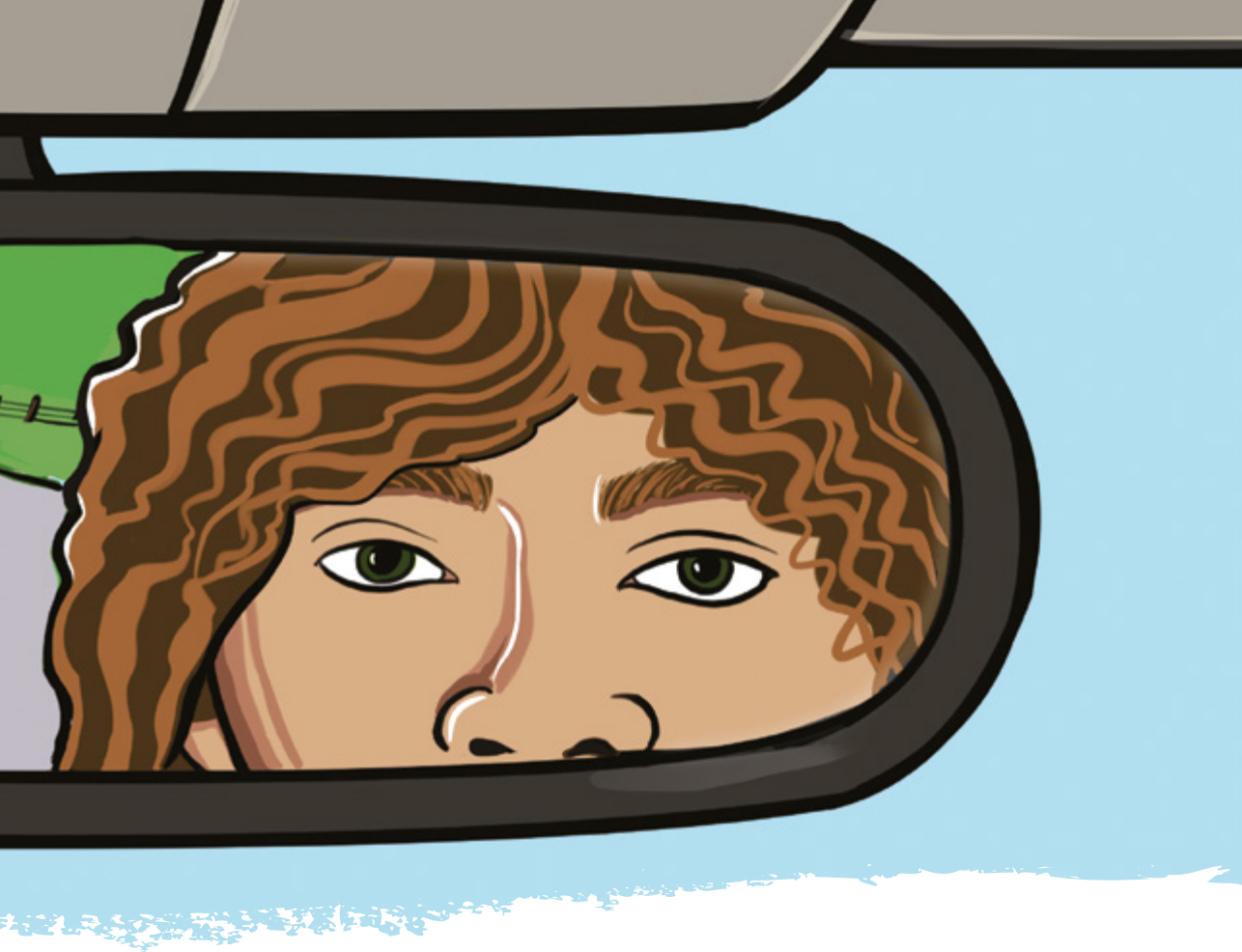
I do what I'm told. Shades has his thumb out, hitching, but he takes no notice as I drive past. Instead, he's squinting back down the road 'cause he can see something *real* familiar coming his way. I pull over and watch the Charger in the rear-view mirror. Shades waves his arms for it to stop, but Hayley ducks down, drives past him, and pulls up next to me. She's sweating bullets but has a big smile.

"Now what?" I ask.

"Simple. Meet me at the rest area by the bridge. We'll leave his car there and take off in mine. We should be long gone before he gets to it."

Simple. So that's what we do. I pick her up, and we hide out by the river.

"You know he threatened me," I say. "Said 'You fullas will keep' like he wants revenge."



“Yeah, well, your uncle was way outta line. Everyone knew it. But we’ve done our bit to fix things. Sometimes you’ve got to let stuff go, or it eats you up. There’s too much mean in the world.”

“True that. Hey, maybe Shades thought it was a ghost car coming back to haunt him.”

“Yeah.” Hayley laughs.

“Reckon it’s safe to head back now?”

“Nah. Better lay low a bit longer.” She looks at the river. “Want to dip your toes in?”

It takes forever to get our sweaty steel caps off. “Sweet driving by the way,” I say. “Shame I didn’t get a pic of you hooning in that Charger.”

“Yeah, instead you posted that one of me holding the SLOW sign with the caption ‘suits her’. Phor! Your feet stink.”

“So do yours! And come on – it was a joke. Everyone knows you’re a brainbox. Who else could have come up with that plan to return the Charger?”

Hayley smiles, shakes her head. She’s got nice hair, even when it’s sweaty. We cool our heels in the water. It’s sweet. Sometimes, it’s good to stop.



Acknowledgments

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