

NOT QUITE A HERO

By Lauri Kubuitsile

Anton accidentally uncovers his father's secret and doesn't know what to do about it. His father is his hero, or at least he was before this. Now Anton wonders about everything and the stress is getting to him. What should he do?

CHAPTER 1

"Ella, can you take a pic of this one?" Anton shouted, kneeling down and looking closely at an orange pattern on the rock.

"Coming!" Ella said. She'd been working on an illustration of a damselfly, a common citril. She left her sketch pad and pencil, and grabbed her camera.

"That's a beauty," Anton's father said, standing over him. Anton liked it when his father came along. He liked that his father was interested in knowing about the things that Anton liked; he was a good dad like that. "Have you been watching it for a long time?"

Anton looked at the orange lichen on the side of the rock and then at his data book. "I've been measuring this one for two years and three months. It's grown in diameter by 0.2 mm. I estimate the rock's age at this spot as 347 years."

They moved away so that Ella could take a photo. Anton and Ella were best friends and had been since primary school. They liked odd things, so their nerdiness brought them

together. Anton loved lichens. This project on lichens and how they can be used to measure the age of rocks, he'd been working on for nearly five years, for no reason except that he was interested in it. The same way Ella drew insects. Ella also played softball and was Mowana High School's star pitcher, so she had some popularity at school now and that helped both of them. At least most kids stopped teasing them now.

"Listen, guys, I'm starving. Any chance we can take a break?" Anton's father said.

"Okay. Let me measure the last one, then we can go," Anton said. "I'm hungry too."

They entered Ko Gae, the most popular restaurant in Nokeng, and took a booth by the window.

"Hey, Sam," Dana, the waitress, said, coming up to the table. Anton watched his father smile. Dana was the friendliest waitress at Ko Gae and they were always happy if she was serving them. It was nice how she'd remembered his father's name. "What have you and your handsome son been up to this morning?"

"Doing science. You know Ant loves science," his father said.

"Sure, I remember you told me that." She winked at him. Anton looked at Ella but she was looking down at the menu.

"Let me give you guys a chance to choose. I'll be right back." Dana turned and left.

As soon as Dana was gone, Anton's father said, "Let me go wash my hands. Get me a burger and chips if she comes back."

He left and Anton said, "That was weird."

"What?" Ella looked up at him.

"That! Like Dana winking and saying her and my dad spoke about me."

Ella shrugged. "Isn't it your father owns a produce wholesaler and Ko Gae is one of his customers? They probably talk about a lot of things. Your dad is great. Don't start letting your mind go out of control like you like to do."

Ella was right. Anton was always getting things wrong because of his over active mind. He once thought his sister, Claire, was running away with her old boyfriend, Jim. He and his dad were in the car about to rush to the bus station when Claire rode up the drive on her bike. She'd been at gymnastics practice and it ran over time. Ella was right. His dad was great. Look how he brought them out to measure the lichens and now took them for breakfast. He supported Anton in everything and even got excited about Anton's projects. He even got excited about Ella's projects. His dad was Anton's hero. Why was he looking for evidence that worked against him? It didn't make any sense.

They ate and then dropped Ella at her place. She had a game in the afternoon.

“See you later then,” Anton called after Ella as she walked up the pavement to their flat.

“Yep.”

At home, Anton’s mother was rushing out of the house when they arrived. “I have a baby coming. Gotta run! Claire’s making lunch. Toodles!”

His mother kissed Anton on the cheek, waved at his father who was still getting the car into the garage, and dashed off on her scooter. She’d taken to riding a scooter because the traffic could be bad and she was a midwife. She didn’t have time to wait in long queues of cars when a new baby was coming into the world. She did home births and needed to be there, since she was the only trained healthcare worker that would be.

As soon as Anton entered the house he smelled the scent of burned food and was happy they’d eaten at Ko Gae. He went into the kitchen.

“Hey, Nerdboy, help me with the rice,” Claire said.

Anton opened the lid and it became clear where the burned smell came from. The rice was burned and also not cooked. How was someone able to do that?

“Yummy! Something smells good!” Anton’s father said, entering the kitchen. “And I’m hungry.”

Anton looked at his father. Did the man have no sense of smell at all? And besides, they were just from eating. His

father shook his head imperceptibly. It was a sign not to talk about it. Like with him, his father supported Claire too, even in her terrible attempts to cook. She thought she was a good cook, and part of the blame for that lay with his father. Anton wondered if it would not be better for everyone if their father told her the truth.

“So did you get your mould measurements?” Claire asked while Anton added water to the rice.

“Lichens. And yes.” Anton was staring despondently down at the pot. There was really no way to save this rice.

“Daddy, after lunch I’m off with Pam. Mom said it’s fine.”

“Ant’s off to Ella’s game and I’ve got some paperwork at the office. We better all take our keys then,” his father said.

Claire kissed her father on the top of his head. “Thanks, Daddy. Let’s eat.”

She set the bowl of burnt, undercooked rice and another of a grey, liquid-y material that might be a stew on the table.

“That looks yummy,” their father said. ‘Yummy’ was the last word Anton would have used to describe what sat before them.

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Ella’s team won the game, so afterwards the coach took them out for a celebratory dinner. Anton was invited since he was

their biggest fan. They headed to Ko Gae, the big hangout on a Saturday night, especially for the kids at Mowana High School. They pushed a bunch of tables together and the coach ordered pitchers of soft drinks and loads of pizzas.

Anton looked out the window and thought he saw Claire outside. He shouted in Ella's ear. "I'll be right back."

Claire didn't like Anton troubling her when she was with her popular friends, but he'd remembered at the game that their mother probably didn't have her keys and wouldn't be able to get in the house. He'd left his cellphone at home and had been worrying about what he'd do. It was lucky he saw his sister. But when he got out to the parking lot, he found that it wasn't Claire after all.

He turned back to go in, and, though it was getting dark now, his eye caught something at the back of the restaurant building. He looked closer and was confused at first. It was his father's car. He was outside the car, standing next to it. That wasn't really what confused Anton. Though his father had said he'd be at his office, maybe he got hungry. What confused him was that his father was holding Dana Wilson, the popular waitress from Ko Gae – and they were passionately kissing!

CHAPTER 2

Anton rushed inside. He grabbed Ella's arm. "We've got to go."

"What? The pizza's not here yet."

"Still. Please. We've got to go."

Ella looked at him, realising he wasn't crazy, but that there might be a problem. "What's wrong?"

"I can't tell you here. Please, please Ella, can we just go?" Anton was getting panicked. Ella knew that could go over the edge, so it was better to leave before it happened.

"Sorry, guys," she said to the others. "I need to dip."

Her team-mates tried to protest but Ella quickly came up with a lie about her sick little sister, Bibi. The team finally let them leave. Once they were outside Ella turned to Anton.

"What is this all about? It better be important! I missed pizza."

Anton pulled her down the road and around a corner before he spoke.

"I saw my dad, he was ..." He tried to control his emotions. He realised only then that he was far more upset than he'd thought. "He was at the back ... he was kissing Dana. He's supposed to be at his office. He told us he was going to his office. But he lied. He was kissing Dana. I saw it. It was him!"

Ella hugged him. "Anton, first you need to calm down. You are getting too upset. You'll make yourself sick. You know how you are. Maybe it's not what you think."

Anton moved away from her. "It is what I think! It couldn't be anything else. You just like my dad; you want to support him.

But I saw what I saw. He was kissing Dana. I knew something was going on this morning. I got a feeling, and now this.”

“I believe you. Don’t get angry at me,” Ella said. “I just think we need to step back a bit.”

Ella took Anton’s hand and led him further down the street they were on. She knew a park around the corner. When they got there, they sat down on the swings. Anton started crying into his hands.

“Why would he do this to my mother? To me and Claire? I thought he loved us.”

“People do a lot of stupid things, Anton. Even adults. Even our parents. Look at my mother.”

Anton knew Ella was right. Her mother left her and her little sister, Bibi, at her grandmother’s when they were both still babies. She’d come to visit them only three times since then, but never even suggested they live with her. She wouldn’t tell anyone who their father was either. Granny T raised them and, at least she was responsible and loved them.

“I thought my father was different,” Anton said.

“We both did.” Anton could see then that Ella was disappointed too. “How long do you think they’ve been involved with each other?”

“I don’t know.” Anton shook his head. He didn’t know anything anymore.

“You know she has a daughter, about three years old.”

“Oh no! Really?” Anton said, shocked. “You don’t think it’s my father’s, do you?”

“I don’t know. Could be if they’ve been together long.”

Anton let his head fall into his hands. He was sure his brain would explode if he heard one more thing about his father and Dana Wilson. They sat quietly for a few minutes.

Then Ella said, “Do you think your mother knows?”

“Oh god! I’ve not thought of that ... of anything really, except what I saw. God, Ella, what am I going to do? Do I tell her? Do I tell Claire?”

“Not Claire.” Ella disliked Claire. She called her Miss Airhead because she wasn’t that bright in school and cared too much about things Ella felt were irrelevant – like expensive clothes, who she dated, and being popular. “She’ll make things worse. She doesn’t think right about most things.”

“I can’t believe he’s doing this.” Anton looked at Ella, hoping she would have some answers for him.

“Maybe he didn’t have a choice. Sometimes things happen and you don’t have a choice about them,” Ella said.

“He was kissing another woman when he’s married. It wasn’t like he had to decide between sacrificing his life to save the planet. What could be forcing him to betray my mother like that?”

Ella's face changed.

“What? Tell me,” he demanded, noticing.

Ella exhaled first before speaking. “You know I love your mother. But she's quite independent of your father. Your mother is really caught up in her job. It's like ... everything. Your father is always sort of milling about ... as if he doesn't know what to do with himself. I think that's why he's always hanging out with us. Maybe your father went looking for a friend and fell in love. You have to admit, *we* even like Dana. Everybody does.”

“This is not my mother's fault! My mother delivers babies. It is nearly the most important job!” Anton was getting angry at Ella now. “And I don't like Dana. Her smile is fake.”

Ella shrugged her shoulders. “You liked her before she was kissing your dad. And – I'm not blaming your mother, *at all*. But they got married so young. Your mother is just really into being a midwife. I think that's great. But she was just a young, inexperienced woman when she married your father. They were both barely in their twenties. People change; they grow apart.”

“Let's go home. I don't want to think about this anymore.”

“Any chance we can find a pizza on the way?” Ella said. Anton kept walking, like she hadn't spoken at all.

CHAPTER 3

The next day, Anton came down for breakfast and found his entire family already at the table, busy eating. He had hoped

he'd delayed long enough in bed and they would be off doing their own Sunday things; apparently, he had not.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," his mother said. "There's some eggs and bacon for you in the oven."

Anton said nothing. He collected his food and sat down.

"So how's Bibi?" Claire asked.

"Bibi?" Anton sipped his tea.

"Rob Moleele said you and Ella left without eating pizza last night because Bibi was sick," Claire said.

"You were there?" Anton asked. He hoped Claire had seen their father too. That would help him to talk to her about what was going on.

"Later. Thato and Pam and me arrived when the team was leaving." Claire looked at him. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"Maybe you caught what Bibi has," his father offered.

"Bibi is not sick!" Anton spoke harsher than he'd intended too, and when he looked up everyone was staring at him.

"Okay," his father said, shrugging his shoulders. "Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed."

His mother patted his hand. “You know what, Ant. I have the whole day off. Let’s me and you go for a hike up to the falls. That always makes you happy. We haven’t had a day together for ages. Pack a picnic. You can call Ella. Maybe she’ll want to bring Fritz. I don’t think that dog gets enough exercise locked up in the flat with Thelma all day.”

Anton thought about how Ella’s grandmother, Thelma, Granny T, walked Fritz five kilometres a day. If anything, the elderly dog got too much exercise. Then he thought that maybe it would be good to be alone with his mother, to have a chance to talk to her about what he’d seen.

“Sounds good,” he said. “Ella’s busy today.”

“Maybe it’s better. We can have a nice quiet walk, just the two of us.”

They drove out to the park where the waterfall trail started. There were only a few cars in the parking lot so hopefully the waterfall wouldn’t be crowded, like it could get on some days.

They got their backpacks out of the boot and headed off. Anton wondered how he would bring up the topic ... and even if he should. Maybe it was better to speak to his father; he was the one who’d made the problem. Maybe his father could stop and sort it all out without his mother ever knowing. In that way, she wouldn’t get hurt.

On the other hand, Anton knew that if it should all come out in some other way, and his mother discovered that he had known about it, she would lose trust in him. She would feel

betrayed. Now he was thinking that he wished he had phoned Ella before they left. She would have known the right thing to do.

The entire thing was making him feel sick. He didn't deal well with stress, especially social stress. People were so complicated. He scratched his arm where a rash was already developing. His stomach felt sore too. It was all too much.

They walked for about an hour and arrived at the waterfall to find no-one.

“Oh what a treat! All to ourselves.” His mother took off her backpack. She sat down and removed her shoes and socks and rolled up the legs of her trousers. At the bottom of the waterfall was a steep-edged, very deep pool. She sat down on the edge and lowered her feet into the icy water. “Oooo, that's nice. Come, Ant! Join me. It's gorgeous.”

Anton sat next to her after he'd removed his own shoes and socks. The water felt soothing on his hot, tired feet.

“I don't know when I last had a day off like this. Completely off.” His mother lay back on the warm rock and looked up at the sky. “This is perfect.”

“You didn't think of coming out here with Dad?” Anton asked.

“You know your father, always busy with the business. He doesn't like this place like you and me do.”

“Are you and Dad friends?”

His mother had her eyes closed. “We were. You know, Ant, if I’m honest I don’t know anymore. We’ve drifted apart I think. I’ve got my moms and babies. He’s got ... I guess carrots and potatoes. I’m not much interested in his things and he’s not much interested in mine.”

Although it was hard to hear, Anton knew his mother – she always told the truth. She’d made a vow before he and Claire were born to never lie to her children. She always said there were enough secrets and lies in the world and it was easier just to be honest.

His mother took his hand and Anton looked at her. She’d opened her eyes. “Don’t worry yourself about us. We’re your parents. That is forever. What happens between us can never affect that.”

“Do you think you’ll part ... like ... divorce?”

“Who knows, Ant? We don’t fight, so that’s good.” Anton nodded. *That was good.* “But then sometimes I think we don’t fight because all of the passion is gone. I guess that’s not so good. Who knows?”

Anton didn’t say it but he thought that they should know. Shouldn’t they know? He remembered Ella saying how parents make mistakes, how they don’t always know what they’re doing, that sometimes they do things they have no control over. Maybe she was right. Even if she was right, it wasn’t so nice for kids.

He looked at his mother, who had closed her eyes again. He thought she might be sleeping but then noticed she was wiggling her feet in the water and humming very softly.

Was marriage such a simple thing then? You could be friends and love each other. Then you'd get married. Eventually the friendship would get lost, and the love too, then you just let it all slip out of your hands like it wasn't worth anything? It made him angry at both of his parents. They should try harder, he thought. It mattered. At least it mattered to him.

CHAPTER 4

"Let me see that one," Anton said. He was lying on Ella's bed and she was at her study table. She handed him her painting of a yellow weaver.

"Wow! You even put the immature bird and the nest shape. You could seriously do a bird guide, Ella."

"One day." She took the painting back. "So, do you think their marriage is over then?"

He'd been telling her about the conversation he had with his mother at the waterfall. "I don't know. What do I know about marriage? I've kissed two boys and one girl. I don't even know if I'm gay or straight."

"Hey! You kissed me once. In Grade 2. Don't you remember?"

"You stole my chocolate! I was trying to get it back."

"*Eeyew!* Don't tell anyone that. Just so you know, I count it." Ella went back to the drawing of a mophane tree she was

working on. “Maybe your father’s thing with Dana is okay. Maybe they agreed about it.”

“If they did, they shouldn’t have. Even if they have some sort of weird ideas about marriage, my father made a promise and promises shouldn’t be broken.” Anton held up his arm. It was covered with red dots. “This thing is even giving me a rash.”

Ella inspected the rash. “I still think you should talk to your dad. Tell him what you saw. Maybe he has something to say in his own defence. You’re judging him without hearing the evidence.”

Anton accepted that Ella was probably right. Why didn’t he just go and talk to his father? They talked about all sorts of things; why couldn’t he ask him about this? He suspected the answer was as easy as: He didn’t want to know that what he saw was exactly what he thought it was. He didn’t want his father to stop being his hero.

Ella’s grandmother poked her head in the bedroom door. “You staying for dinner, Anton?”

“No, but thanks, Granny T. It’s some big deal dinner because Claire isn’t going to fail Grade 8 after all. They expect me at home.”

“Okay, next time then.”

At home, Anton was happy to see his father had cooked dinner, and not Claire. Instead of going into the kitchen to help as he normally would have, he shouted that he needed a shower and slipped into his room. He was not ready to be

alone with his dad. Once he heard his mother and Claire arrive, and when they called dinner was ready, he came out.

His mother had bought non-alcoholic champagne and she made a toast. “To Claire, whose hard work has paid off!”

Anton had got straight As ever since he’d started school and never had a party with fake champagne. He wasn’t jealous of this celebration of Claire, though. He was happy she would at least be able to write matric.

“So, Anton, how was your day? You’ve been quiet lately,” his father asked.

“Fine.” He pushed his plate away. “Can I be excused? I’ve got homework.”

“Ant, let me see your arm.” His mother looked at the rash. “How long has that been there?”

“A few days. It’s nothing. I think I got it in the bush.”

He rushed off to his room. He put his earphones on and was listening to Elaine singing *You’re the One* on repeat. He had his eyes closed so hadn’t noticed anyone had entered his room until he felt a touch on his arm. He jumped and saw it was Claire.

“What’s wrong with you, Nerdboy?” Claire said. “You’re acting so weird. Are you in love?”

Anton laughed. “No. Like *no*.”

“Then what is it? I know those ones made a big deal about me only just passing. Are you jealous? You shouldn’t be. It’s nothing. You know it’s that squeaky wheel gets the grease thing, right? They know that you’re a star.”

Something about Claire’s sudden empathy and kindness made Anton start crying.

“Hey! Now you’re scaring me. Do you have cancer or something? I really cannot deal with cancer just now,” Claire said.

Anton laughed at his sister’s complete self-centeredness. He wiped his tears away. “I don’t have cancer, and after hearing your response, I can only be thankful for that.”

“Then what is it. You’ve been weird ever since last Saturday. What happened?”

“Okay, I’ll tell you, but you need to seriously promise that you will not freak out.”

“God! Such a drama queen! I doubt there is anything in your pathetic life of picking at fungus in the forest and following a softball team that you do not even play for that would cause me to freak out.”

Anton sighed. Claire really did not know herself. “Last Saturday, when Dad said he was at his office, he was actually at Ko Gae kissing Dana.”

“What? Dana? Like, that cute waitress?”

“Is she cute? I don’t think she’s cute. But yes, *that* Dana.”

Claire flopped backwards on the bed, her head hanging off the bottom. “What the hell?! So did you ask Dad about it?”

“No. I talked to Mom.”

“You told Mom? Nerdboy, why? Why on earth would you do that?”

“I didn’t tell her. I just asked her how things were going in their marriage. She said they weren’t.”

Claire sat up. “This makes me so sad. I don’t want to be a child of divorce.”

“You know, Claire, not everything is about you? What about Mom? He’s cheating and lying to her.”

Claire thought about it for a bit. “You need to talk to Dad.”

“Why me? I told you. Now you can talk to him. You’re the oldest. This is exactly the sort of thing that the oldest child is supposed to take care of.”

“He won’t take it well coming from his daughter who he adores. He needs you. You know man-to-man is the way these things need to be done. You need to talk to him.”

Anton rolled his eyes. Ella was right; Claire was not going to be helpful. “I’m not actually a man.”

“Yeah, but you’re man enough. Until you talk to Dad, keep your mouth shut. Tell no-one anything. Especially Mom. Of course Ella knows, right?”

“Yes. She was there.”

“It doesn’t matter. Ella keeps secrets likes she’s paid to.”

Anton wondered what secrets Ella might have about Claire that she was grateful Ella had kept for her. Anton hoped none. He’d feel betrayed if Ella kept Claire’s secrets away from him. And then he remembered that was exactly what he was doing to his mother.

CHAPTER 5

Ella and Anton were cycling home from collecting the lichen data the next Saturday. “Please can we get breakfast? Granny T is off to the meeting about the train boycott. There’ll be nothing at home and I’m weak with hunger.”

Anton knew Ella meant for them to stop at Ko Gae. “Only if Dana’s car is not in the parking lot. I just cannot see that woman right now.”

“Deal.”

When they got to the restaurant, Anton checked the entire lot to make sure Dana wasn’t there. Back at Ella he said, “Okay let’s go. All clear.”

A new waitress served them. They both ordered the mega-breakfast. As they waited, Ella took out her sketch pad to show him some sketches she’d made of foliose lichen.

“You know, you really know how to get the feeling of a particular species of lichen into your sketches. This could so easily just look like some lettuce leaves, but it is clear it is lichen. You know when I do a book about my research, I want you to do the illustrations,” Anton said, overly excited about the sketch.

“I would love that,” Ella said.

“How cool would it be to have a book with both of our names on the cover?”

“Best thing ever!” Ella raised her hand for a high five and Anton slapped it.

“So, what are you two so worked up about?”

They both looked up and there was Dana. She immediately noticed their change in behaviour. “You’re looking at me like I eat babies. What did I do?”

“Nothing,” Ella quickly said in the hope that Dana would go away before Anton got too upset. “You just frightened us. We didn’t know anyone was there.”

Dana patted Anton’s shoulder. “Sorry, Ant. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Don’t call me that! My name is Anton! And don’t touch me!”

People in the restaurant looked their way.

“It’s fine, Anton,” Ella whispered. “Leave it. She didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I’m sorry, honey, I didn’t mean to upset you,” Dana said.

Anton said nothing ... and then he couldn’t. It had been seven days of emotions all piled up inside, like a volcano that was blocked and couldn’t erupt. Suddenly that big boulder blocking the entrance shifted and the lava burst out – all over the table, the checked tiled floor, all over his father’s mistress.

“Leave us alone! Leave my father alone! Who do you think you are, destroying our family? I saw you! I saw you kissing my father! I know!” He pounded his chest. “I know!”

Ella pulled him to his feet. She dragged him out of the restaurant. Outside, she quickly unlocked the bikes and pushed him at him.

“Get on. You’re fine. Everything’s fine. Get on the bike.”

Anton mechanically climbed on the bicycle even though his eyes were blurry with tears and his arms were shaking.

“I’ll make us cereal at the flat,” Ella said.

Anton looked back at the restaurant and Dana was standing in the parking lot, her hands by her side, crying.

At the flat, they were surprised to find Ella's grandmother at home. She was just about to go out with Fritz when she saw Anton.

"What happened?" she said. She took Anton by the hand and led him into the kitchen. She sat him in one of the hard, straight-backed, wooden chairs and got him a glass of water. "Drink."

She watched him until he'd drunk the entire glass. "Okay. Tell me."

Ella started to explain, but Granny T held up her hand. "Let him talk."

Anton started to explain about seeing his father and Dana. About how he'd not known what to do. How his mother didn't seem to care about the marriage anymore. And about his rude, loud outburst at Ko Gae.

"I feel terrible. I made a spectacle of myself. And I'm not sure Dana is who I'm even angry with," Anton said. "I even have a rash."

"First, forgive yourself right now. You're human and you're a kid. You were given a heavy bag to carry and it was unfair." She looked at Ella. "Do something useful. Make your friend some breakfast. And not cereal."

She turned back to Anton. "Now, your parent's marriage is their business. But your father made a mistake making it yours. I'm sure he'll be knowing about that soon enough.

What I've learned along the way, is people need to feel what they're feeling. You need to feel what you're feeling. You're angry. You're scared. It's okay. Those are your feelings. When your father asks you, tell him. Tell him what you're feeling about everything. He's going to have his own feelings. Your mother is too; so's Claire. Let people feel. Then, you got love. On the other side of those feelings, you'll find a way. One way or another, you'll find a way. If it's tough for a bit, you got Ella and you got me."

Anton smiled at Granny T. She took a cloth handkerchief out of the pocket of her trousers and wiped his face dry.

"Now, me and Fritz need to go check the news in the neighbourhood. You and Ella eat your breakfast, while I get ready."

Ella managed boiled eggs and toast. She even cut an orange in quarters. She set it on the table just as the door out of the flat closed.

CHAPTER 6

Anton stayed at Ella's until just before dark. Then he cycled home and slipped into his room without anyone hearing. He hoped no-one would find him until morning. He needed time to let his mind settle.

He must have fallen asleep because the knock on his door startled him awake. When he looked at the clock it was past eight.

"Ant? Ant? Are you in there? Can we talk?"

It was his father. He stayed quiet for a bit, wondering what he should do.

“Ant, I heard you come home. I just want to talk.”

Anton sat up on his bed. He didn't have a choice. This was going to happen. “Come in.”

His father came in and closed the door behind him. He sat down on the bed and sighed. “I heard about what happened at Ko Gae. Dana called me. I'm sorry all of this happened,” he started.

“Me too,” Anton said. He didn't want to get angry again. He would listen and try his best to keep his feelings in check.

“It's not what you think,” his father said. “Well it is sort of, but not *really* what you think.”

Suddenly the volcano was there again and Anton could not stop it. “Is Alison your baby?”

“No! No, Ant, it is not like that at all. Please, don't think that about me.”

“Okay. Good.” Anton played with the corner of his duvet and waited. His emotions calmed down.

“Dana and I are ... were ... just friends. You know how she is. She's always friendly. I deliver the produce and sometimes she'd bring me a cup of coffee. I've known her for a couple of years now. But always – only friends. I promise. Never

anything else. The crazy thing is the one time it changed, you happened to see it.”

Anton looked at his father. He wondered if he was telling the truth. It seemed like he was. “You’d never, like ... you never kissed or anything before?”

“No.” His father was looking down at his hands. “I never meant for it to happen then that night when you saw us. It’s just ... over the years we spoke about things, personal things. She had her relationship with Alison’s father and me with your mother. We advised each other. It was helpful. But that day, I was just not myself. The night before your mother had decided some things. I guess I was just a bit lost. I went to Dana to talk about it all, to try to get some perspective.”

“Mom decided what things?”

“No, let’s not talk about that. Your mom and me, well, we have our own things to attend to. Anyway, we’ll sort it out. And we both love you, Ant. We love you so, so much.”

“I know, Dad.”

“I’m sorry you saw that. Don’t be angry at Dana. We’re just two people. We’re not perfect. And, in any case, she is not the one who did anything wrong, it was me.”

His father hesitated, and then he stood. He slapped his hands on his jeans-covered thighs. “That’s it. I just wanted to say that I was sorry. Please, I never wanted this to happen. I never wanted you to have to carry a secret like that.”

“Okay.” Anton couldn’t give his father any more than that just then. He watched him leave and fell back on his bed to think. How did life become so complicated?

The next morning was a Sunday. When Anton entered the kitchen, he found only his mother sitting in a patch of sun, drinking coffee and reading a book.

“Good morning, Ant. Pancakes; are you up for some?” she said, setting the book down and standing up.

“Sure. But I can make my own.”

She sat back down smiling. “You’re growing up. Batter is in the fridge.”

Anton put the oil in the frying pan and turned on the burner. When it was hot, he poured in some of the batter.

“So ... your father told me. And he told me you and he spoke,” she said.

Anton flipped the pancakes and then looked at his mother. “Are you okay, Mom?”

“You know what, Ant? I am. What about you?”

“I’m alright.”

He put the pancakes on a plate, grabbed some tea and sat down with his mother. She placed her hand on his shoulder.

“We’re going to all be fine,” she said. “Some things will change, but me and your father are going to make sure you guys are fine. We both love you very much. Your father is really not the bad guy here. No-one is. Don’t be too hard on him. He’s still a good man, not a superhero, just a good man. And that’s saying a lot.”

“I think you’re right. Thanks, Mom.”

CHAPTER 6

“Hey you!” Ella shouted from across the park. Anton saw she was coming with Fritz.

Anton took Alison’s hand and started walking towards Ella. Alison pulled her hand from his. “I’m fine you know. I can walk without holding someone’s hand now, Anton.”

One thing Anton had learned over these last two years that he’d known his step-sister was that she was fiercely independent. He let go of her hand so she could run to Ella, someone she particularly liked.

After all of the initial crazy drama two years ago, his mother told Claire and him that she got accepted into a doctorate programme on midwifery, in the UK. She and their father had already agreed that they should part and go on their own separate journeys. And they had. She was in the UK still. She’d be there for another year and then she’d come home. Where her home would finally be, she wasn’t sure yet.

Claire failed matric, sort of as everyone expected, and went to Joburg to study stage make-up. She was always sending Anton photos of her arm slashed open and the bone exposed

or her face bruised and cut. Anton still hadn't managed to not get a huge fright each time one of the photos landed in his phone. Claire would have a laughing fit while she wiped her blue eye and deep gashes off with a piece of tissue.

Anton lived alone with his father for a year. Then his dad married Dana, and she and Alison moved in. It was difficult at first; they all needed to adjust to the new situation. Dana was as friendly as Anton had always thought she was, and eventually things worked out, just like Granny T had said they would. Maybe not how Anton had expected them to, but he realised now that that was okay too.

Ella came up holding Alison, pulling Anton from his thoughts. He laughed when he saw them.

"So you're too big for me to hold your hand but not too big for Ella to carry you?" he asked Alison. He liked having a little sister more and more each day.

"Ella is a famous softball pitcher." Anton shook his head. He would not try to sort that one out. "And she has a dog," Alison added.

"Do you want to walk Fritz around the park?" Ella asked, as she set her back on her feet.

Alison said nothing. She held out her hand for the leash as her answer.

Ella and Anton sat on the nearby bench and watched Alison walk off towards the swings, with the dog.

“So? Tomorrow are we going out to the lichens?” Ella asked.

“Yep.” Anton smiled. He liked their Saturday ritual. “My dad’s coming if that’s fine.”

“Sure.”

They sat quietly for a bit, the way friends can.

Ella took a paper from her pocket. “I got this yesterday. I was going to call and tell you, but I thought maybe it was better like this.”

“Is it from ... like ... the publisher?” Anton asked. Ella nodded, holding the paper out to him, though he refused to take it.

“Is it ... bad news?” He moved away from her, not wanting to see that they’d been rejected.

“Can you take it and read?” Ella insisted.

Anton tentatively took the paper. He read it and looked up at his friend, smiling. “So? So, this is happening?”

They had decided a year and half ago, when everybody was making all sorts of bold moves in their lives, that maybe they should too. They put together a book: *Identification of Lichens in North-eastern South Africa*. Ella did the illustrations and Anton the text. Ella sent it off to a publisher ... a publisher who had now written back to say that they would be delighted to publish it!

Anton and Ella jumped up from the bench and grabbed each other, dancing in a circle and shouting with happiness. Alison and Fritz came running back to them.

“What happened?” Alison asked. “Tell me. I want to be happy too.”

“We’re going to have a book published,” Anton said.

“Yay! Can I dance with you?” she asked.

Anton held his hand out to her, Ella took her other one. They danced in a circle and Anton thought again, as he often did over these last two years – *things find a way to work out*. It might all take some time, but eventually they find their way.

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