

knowledge

Simon knew that he knew it all, and his mother supported him in this belief, even though she did know that there were some things Simon definitely did not know, like who his father was.

Simon suspected Councillor George Hedges, chairman of the Central Planning Committee, because he was always popping round for tea and staying for breakfast. Alternatively, he could be Mr Higley, the butcher, because he was always giving her special cuts and winking. Or possibly Barry, the hairdresser, who leaned over his mother far more than was necessary for a trim and blow dry. Or maybe even ...

‘Did you pick up the envelope from Finagle’s like I told you to?’ His mother’s voice sliced through the bathroom door and slapped him round the head.

‘On the kitchen table,’ Simon said, making sure to flush properly and use the aerosol according to the instructions stuck on the mirror. Enough of the speculation, because now he had to focus, focus, focus. After all, how many other fresh out of college Town Planners got the chance to make a proposal like this one?

‘Thank you Sweetheart. Now I’ve got to get back to the Chambers (in other words the Council Offices, where she had been a secretary until eighteen months ago). Make sure you get to the architect’s office on time and see that your drawings are ready for them.’

‘Yes Mum.’

‘There’s a quiche in the fridge. Save some for me if the council business goes on too late.’

‘Yes Mum.’

Both of them knew that the offices shut at five and no one would stay any later, least of all the caretaker who had the key, but it was mutual conceit bubble neither of them was about to burst.

‘What about the letter from Councillor Gwent? *The opposition*,’ Simon went on with a derisive snort. ‘Shouldn’t we be looking at it to see what she’s got against our plans?’

Harriet stared into the hall mirror, checking her roots. ‘Enough questions. You leave that to me.’

In fact, there were a lot of questions Simon didn’t ask anymore. The identity of his father being one and his mother’s sudden, uncharacteristic, interest in his career being another. Town Planning had not been a first choice for him. He had thought that law might be useful or maybe medicine, but his horizons shrank when his marks came in.

‘Never mind,’ Jane Daniels from next door had said. ‘Lack of brains is a basic Town Planning requirement. You’ll fit in really well.’

Harriet hadn’t said very much to this, which surprised Simon because she usually had a lot to say, but planning permission for Mrs Daniel’s double garage had been refused just a week later. The Daniels would have to eat their words now, because his Town Planner’s degree, and the thesis his Mum had helped him to write, were all about to pay off.

Absentee

‘Grinder.’

‘Here.’

‘Alba.’

‘Here.’

‘Scion.’

‘Here.’

‘Kami.’

Silence

‘Kami?’

Twenty young mole noses spun round to sniff the gap between Alba and Scion, where Kami should have been. This meant trouble.

‘Has anyone seen Kami?’ Morphous Slide, the Origins Professor sighed. The youngster had always been a problem. Wouldn’t concentrate, didn’t want to know about mole life and had no interest in his future role as Colony Leader. Something had gone wrong with the last two Leader litters. Kami was hopelessly inept and his younger brother, Scion, was a bully and a troublemaker.

‘Where’s he gone this time?’ Scion whispered accusingly to a female mole sitting on the other side of the glaring gap.

‘How should I know? He was doing Leadership with Starnose the last time I heard him.’

‘He’s your friend isn’t he? Mother says that it’s because of you that he keeps running off when he should be here learning mole-craft.’

Alba’s fur rippled angrily over her wide forehead. ‘If your Mother knows so much, then she should also know that the only reason you’re in

the same class as your older brother is because you cheat. Or maybe someone should tell her.'

'Try it, Stinker!' Scion sneered back, forgetting to lower his voice, with the result that at least ten moles in the rows in front heard him and turned round in horror. No one said that to Alba, not if they wanted to live.

'Stinker yourself!' she said, while simultaneously pulling down a lump of ceiling soil onto Scion's head.

It took two Turbo Drivers to clear up the mess and a Pneuma-Prop to shore up the ceiling. The Chief said he would have to do a seismic check to make sure there were no catastrophic cracks forming in the system.

'The only catastrophe in this place is her!' Yelled Slab, pointing over to Alba. He was Scion's best, in fact only friend, but no one was listening because no one ever took any notice of what he said. Anyway, watching Scion being carried out on a tow trolley was much more fun.

'I'll tell Mother about this,' he groaned.

'About what?' Asked Alba with a sneery snarl. 'About how pathetic you are?'

But her defiance evaporated as soon as she was alone. 'Why does Kami do this? It just gets everyone in trouble and I know I'll get the blame, even though I really don't know where he is this time.'

Naming Names

Tony Junior was not, as you might expect, a boy. *I should just get a placard stuck on my back*, she thought, after dealing with yet another inane comment from a new neighbour. *No Tony is not short for Antonia. I'm called Tony Junior because Dad wanted a boy and got me instead.* But it wasn't just the neighbours who were getting her down, it was everything else, and mainly her Mum, who had gone to stay with Granny Mould, which meant that during the holidays Tony Junior had to go to work with her Dad.

Five blokes on a building site weren't much company for a thirteen year old girl, especially when all they could think of saying was, 'You don't look like a boy to me.' Or 'Watch out! The Heythorpe woman's coming so you'd better get the girl out of sight.' The week before it had got so bad that she had even considered calling her Mum and asking if she could stay with her, but then the thought of her grandmother made even the building site seem like heaven. Granny Mould washed clothes by hand, wouldn't have a television, computer or phone in the house, and ate potato skins. Anyway, since Tony Junior had found the pile of gravestones hidden under the trees, where none of the builders went, she wasn't bored anymore.

Some of the stones had the names of children on them, names like Mary, Ethel and Rebecca, with their ages etched in beside them. They had all died young, some even younger than Tony Junior, so she tried to imagine their faces and make up stories about how they had grown up, found jobs and maybe had more children themselves. The thinking made her want to find out more, and when she could not find anything on the net, she asked her Dad if she could go to the library to read about the Sunley Manor Workhouse that had been on the site.

‘How do you know about it?’ He’d seemed tense at first.

‘Everyone knows,’ she’d replied quickly. ‘Anyway, can I go?’

Actually, it was old Mrs Turner, who had told her, but she didn’t want to say so, because then her Dad would go on about how she had reported him for running a mechanics business from his back yard.

‘Fair enough, but don’t go talking to your friends about the place or taking them up there,’ he said finally. ‘Do you understand?’ Tony Junior had nodded and made a sign of sticking tape over her mouth, which her Dad must have liked, because then he said: ‘I’ll drop you off at the library on my way to work tomorrow. You can walk over after you’ve got your books, but mind you come in through the back fence.’

Now, being on the site was much better. She kept away from where the men were working and sat on the gravestones reading about the workhouse and how the children had died of tuberculosis, malnutrition and even flu. Tony Junior found it hard to imagine anyone dying of something only slightly worse than a bad cold.

The book also explained that it was cheaper to dig a hole and bury the children at the bottom of the workhouse garden, though even then the gravestones were only given to the children who had been entered in the ledger, or came later when people began to feel guilty about what had gone on there. In fact, only a small proportion of the deaths were recorded. Most of the children would have been buried nameless, so Tony Junior gave them names like Naomi and Hannah. The kind of names she would have liked to have for herself, if her Dad hadn’t wanted her to be a boy.

Seeing the Light

Kami knew he was going to be in big trouble, but he didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore. He was half way out of the tunnel exit, his head up in the air, his front paws on the soft blades of meadow grass and his eyes wide, wide open.

The bright light had hurt the first time, burning two points into his head, and making his eyes blink and flicker behind the thin film of skin that covered them. He remembered hearing his own shrill shriek of pain, but he had persisted and slowly, very slowly, he began to detect shapes and movement, in a way that made his heart race with excitement.

Moles feel, hear and smell better than any other tunnel dweller. He repeated one of the few Origin lessons he could remember. *Surface dwellers, such as rats and rabbits have developed an additional sense known as sight, which compensates for their other, less well developed sensory organs, but moles remain supreme underground.*

Sight, seeing, words that Kami had learnt but never really understood, at least not until that First Time. Since then he thought of his life as being split in two, the Before and the After, the not seeing and the seeing.

What kind of mole am I? Kami asked himself the same question every time he looked into the light. He couldn't smell, feel or hear half as well as the others did. He got lost in new tunnels and couldn't orienteer the old ones. He thought maybe he could see, but he was neither a rat nor a rabbit.

Being a failure made Kami feel hopeless. Most of the time he wished he could just run away and never come back, but now he sensed that perhaps nothing was as simple as it had first appeared because, for the

first time in his life, he was experiencing a sense of power and strength. *I can see! Why can't I feel like this all time?*

'Kami what are doing?' Someone was tugging at his foot so hard that he was losing his grip on the soil.

'Let me go!'

'No! You've got to come down.'

Before he knew what was happening, Kami had landed heavily on something soft and 'Alba! Look at you!'

'Mm,' she mumbled from under him. 'What do you mean?'

He stared into the pool of light still leaking through from above. 'That's why you smell!' Kami scrambled off her as quickly as he could, not only to avoid hurting her, but also to avoid the paw he knew would come his way. 'No wait!' he tried again. 'You've got to listen.' Kami had *seen* the difference the moment he looked down, Alba's brightness against his own dense darkness. 'That's it!' He exclaimed. 'You don't smell like us because you're ... erm you're not like us ... that's why everyone teases you.'

Alba gave him a shove, which told him she wasn't in the mood for his nonsense. 'You're talking even more beetle dung than usual, now close that hole before I throw up.'

In other circumstances Kami might have tried to explain, but even his reduced levels of mole perception told him that Alba wasn't just angry. 'What's up? Are you all right?' Stupid question. If she'd been all right she wouldn't be trying to roll herself up in a tight ball with her hair sticking up like claws along her back.

'We've got to shut the tunnel,' she gasped. 'It's horrible. Can't you feel it?'

It? Kami had always felt It, even if he wasn't sure what It was. The popping and fizzing in his head that made him want run and never, never stop. Yes, agreed, he couldn't sniff out a worm track and his hair never went the way it was supposed to in a tunnel, but Alba wasn't completely right either. She smelled wrong and now he knew why. She was light when everyone else was dark.

‘Oooh!’ She groaned. ‘My chest hurts and my head’s going to explode.’

Kami sniffed her and knew she wasn’t kidding. He’d never smelt it before, but he’d been told about the air-death that could take out a mole in less than three breaths.

‘I’m digging over now,’ he told her hurriedly. ‘Don’t move until I call you.’ And with that the earth erupted around him in a display of energy, if not skill, that would have impressed even his fiercest critics. What a shame they could not be there.

‘You are in serious, serious trouble,’ Alba told him when she had got her breath back. ‘I don’t know what they’re going to do to you, but it’s going to be bad. I’m in trouble too, because of what I did to Scion.’

‘Scion? What did you do?’

Kami laughed when she told him. He would have given anything to do the same, but Alba had got there before him. He knew it was wrong to hate anyone, but his hatred of Scion was deep in the pit of his stomach. A physical ache, a daily reminder that he was a failure and would never be able to protect the colony as a Colony Leader should. That was the part that hurt him most.

‘Listen!’ Alba’s urgent tugging on his belly fur brought him back to the present. ‘Someone’s -’

Too late. Starnose was already looming over them, with the Tracking Team standing just behind.

‘Disobedient young beggars!’ He roared at them. ‘Future Leader or not, young Kami, you’ve gone too far this time.’ Kami cowered without bothering to argue. There wasn’t any point. Anyway, with the tunnel closed he had lost all the power he had felt just moments before. ‘As for you young litter female,’ Starnose snapped his vicious snout round in her direction. ‘You will be in solitary for the rest of the warm period. Is that clear?’ Alba nodded, sensing that even the Trackers felt vaguely sorry for her. Solitary in the warm period was a stiff punishment, almost as bad as total banishment, and that hadn’t happened in living memory.

Next, they were taken down to the Colony Meeting Chamber. On the way Starnose told Kami that his Father would be there, which was about as bad as it could get. Occasional meetings with his Mother, usually when he'd failed a test or been found in a sleep pit during forage practice were bad enough, but moles only ever met their fathers when it was really serious. In fact, Kami couldn't even remember what his father smelt like. Alba was to be spared that horror because her parents had both died in the last water-rise, but they took her straight down to solitary without even letting her say goodbye to her sleep pit partners.

'Good luck,' she whispered to Kami, as they parted. 'Don't let them stop you being yourself.'

'I'll find a way of reaching you,' he whispered back, even though he knew that the reinforced solitary tunnels were just about impossible to get through.