



The Flying Test

story by Sara Matson , illustrated by Douglas Holgate

'Today is 20 April 3012,' the newscaster announced. 'In top news this morning, Willis Everson returns to Earth for the last time today. After twenty years with the National Space Settlement Program, Everson is retiring to spend more time with his family. The famous astronaut is best known for leading Earth's first mission to Jupiter in 3005. In recent years, Everson commanded multiple supply convoys to Earth's colony on Mars. During an interview with SPACENEWS magazine—'

ANTRIK EVERSON SWITCHED off the cosmovision. He had to get ready for school.

'Are you excited?' Mum asked as she entered the kitchen. She took three eggs from the preserver and placed them in the Insta-Cook, then pressed scramble and start.

'Yeah,' Antrik answered. 'But nervous, too. I sure hope I pass.'

Mum's forehead wrinkled. 'Pass? I was talking about Dad coming home. What are you talking about?'

'My flying test,' Antrik said. 'It's after school today, remember?'

'Oh my stars, I completely forgot. Antrik, you can't take your test today!'

'If I cancel, I won't be able to get another appointment for at least six months,' Antrik protested. 'I'd be thirteen before I got my licence. No-one waits that long!'

The Insta-Cook chimed. Mum took out the now-scrambled eggs and dished them onto two plates. 'I suppose it's okay. Dad has to debrief, and then he has a news conference. He probably won't be home until dinnertime anyway.' Her eyes widened. 'I know! We can celebrate his homecoming and your licence! He'll be so proud of you.'

'If I pass,' Antrik said. What if he failed the test? What would Dad think of him? Over the years, they had connected through cosmovision, but with time zones and equipment glitches and planetary interference, their conversations had been few and far between. What if Dad turned out to be like his friend Laron's dad, who had yelled at Laron for an hour when he failed his flying test?

'Are you okay, honey?' Mum asked. Antrik nodded. Changing the subject, he said, 'So, what are we having for dinner? After being gone for seven years, Dad should get something extra good, shouldn't he?'

Mum smiled. 'Hamburgers. They're his favourite, and there was no way to get one on the spaceship. Or on Mars, of course.'

'I didn't know he likes hamburgers.' Just another thing to add to the list of things he didn't know about his dad.

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At school that day, everybody was talking about Willis Everson. The universal history teacher treated the class to a twenty-minute lecture on the famous astronaut's legacy, and the school administrator stopped Antrik in the hallway, saying, 'We'd be very interested in having your father speak at a school assembly. Please mention it to him.' In several of Antrik's classes, various kids shoved slips of paper and moonball caps and even a T-shirt at him, asking for his father to autograph them. Even Laron brought up the subject at lunch.

'So, will you get to meet the World President, now that your dad's back?'

Antrik scowled. 'Why would I?'

Laron flicked an olive off his pizza slice. 'C'mon, your dad's legendary. The World President will definitely want to give him a medal or something. Maybe she'll invite your whole family to The Mansion.'

'I doubt it.' Antrik pushed his lunch tray away. He wasn't hungry anymore. 'Anyway, I don't want to talk about my dad.'

'Okay,' Laron said good-naturedly. 'Let's talk about your flying test then. Did you practise your vertical parking?'

‘That’s the only part I’m worried about,’ Antrik admitted. Somehow, every time he practised vertical parking, he ended up a few feet too high or too low. Once, he’d even dented an expensive sports flier parked beneath him. Of course, the flier’s auto-repair had immediately restored it, but if he did that during his test, he’d probably fail.

‘Well, you can’t do worse than that kid who killed his examiner,’ Laron said.

‘What!’

‘My brother told me about him. It happened a long time ago, back when they used human test examiners instead of robots. The kid was trying to aero park, and he crashed the test pod. His examiner died on the way to the hospital.’ Laron took a huge gulp of banapple juice, burped and added, ‘That kid probably never got his licence.’

Antrik smiled. Feeling better, he grabbed the pizza off his tray and jammed it in his mouth. Laron’s brother had probably made up that story. But whether it was true or not, Antrik knew that he had to be a much better driver than that mythical kid. Even with his parking troubles.

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After school, Antrik took the community aerobus to the testing centre. Once inside, he went through the retinal scan and fingerprint identification. Then he sat down to wait. The longer he waited, the more nervous he got. The reading material in the waiting room didn’t help either. Everywhere he looked, he saw a headline about famous spaceman Willis Everson.

‘Everson?’ intoned the receptionist. ‘Antrik Everson?’

Antrik rode the conveyor belt into the test hangar and entered the test pod. Once he was seated, he wiped his sweaty hands on his jacket and took a few deep breaths. Finally, an automated voice filled the pod: ‘Antrik Everson, your flying test will now begin. Please perform a standard safety check of your pod before igniting the engine.’

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An hour later, he exited the hangar feeling totally drained. Hovering had been easy, and he’d had no trouble linking onto the commuter wire or ascending and descending the aerovator. However, parking hadn’t gone so well. He hadn’t dented anything this time, but he had scratched the test pod while navigating into a narrow slot between a nine-person aerovan and one of those new rover hybrids that resembled a funny-looking octopus. He hoped that what he’d done right was enough to earn him a passing grade.

He had just reached the aerobus station when his communication watch beeped and flashed a message from the testing centre:

TEST RESULT: FAIL. LICENCE DENIED.

No! Antrik stepped onto the aerobus and slumped into the first empty seat. Now he wished he had postponed the test like Mum had suggested. He could have used that extra six months to practise parking.

Another beep announced a message from Mum:

DAD HOME. CAN'T WAIT TO SEE YOU. HURRY!

Dad! Suddenly, Antrik felt like he'd eaten a kilo of moon dust. This was the worst thing that had ever happened to him! What if the media heard about it? He pictured the headlines: Famous Flyer Will Everson Arrives Home to Wife and Flying Failure Son. He pictured his family at The Mansion, the WP saying that she bet Antrik was a chip off the old block, and his dad replying, 'Not really. Antrik didn't get the flying gene from me. In fact, I don't think he'll ever get his licence.'

The aerobus let him off, and he walked home as slowly as possible. Outside his flat, he hesitated. What if he just didn't go in? Maybe the library was still open ...

Another beep.

WHERE ARE YOU?

There was no avoiding it. He waved his watch under the scanner and unlocked the door.

'Antrik?' Mum called as he stepped inside. The entry way smelled of hamburgers and chocoberry pie.

He sighed. 'Yep.'

He heard footsteps and then both his parents were in the entry way, and Dad was hugging him. In spite of how awful he felt—or maybe because of it—the hug was pretty good. You couldn't get hugs like that over cosmovision.

But then came the moment he'd been dreading.

'You're so late,' Mum said. 'How did the test go?'

Antrik looked down. 'I ... well, I failed. I messed up on parking.'

Surprisingly, Dad laughed. Okay, so he was going to make fun of the situation. Laron's dad did that sometimes. Antrik didn't like being laughed at, but maybe it was better than a lecture.

But Dad didn't say anything sarcastic like Laron's dad might have. Instead, he shook his head. 'That pesky parking. It's the curse of the Eversons.'

'What do you mean?' Antrik asked.

Dad put his arm around Antrik's shoulder. 'Haven't you heard about the guy who crashed his test pod and—'

'Killed his examiner?'

Dad blinked. 'My examiner hit his head and had to stay in the hospital overnight. I didn't kill him.'

'Wait. That was you?' Antrik asked. 'I thought it was just a story.'

Dad pointed at himself and grinned. 'That was me, famous astronaut Willis Everson ... thirty years ago.'

'No way!' Antrik said, suddenly feeling as weightless as he had at his sixth birthday party. (It had taken place in an anti-gravity chamber.)

'It's true,' Dad said. 'Come have a hamburger, and I'll tell you about it.'