Chapter 1

Faith, Family and Rugby

I'm sitting in the back of the car with Mako. I stuff a large, greasy chip coated in delicious curry sauce into my mouth and chew on it contentedly until it's pulped into nothingness and slides down my throat. Almost before that's happened, my hand is automatically reaching for another chip and I repeat the process.

I'm aware of a commotion in the front of the car. There are raised voices from my mum, in the passenger seat, and my dad, who's driving.

I take another chip. It tastes better than the last one. And the one before that. But not as good as the next one will taste.

Do they taste so good because we won? Or because we won and we both scored a couple of tries each? I'm not sure it makes a difference. Chips and curry sauce will always taste heavenly.

There are some angry words being shouted in our direction in the back of the car. But probably at another driver. Not at us. We won. We played well.

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Another chip. And another.

More shouting in the front.

'You two think you're the boys,' says my dad.

Yes we do. And we are. I think that too. Good, we are in agreement. I can carry on eating my chips. But why is he shouting these things at us?

'Everyone else is running around, and you two might as well have been standing on the sideline.'

As I destroy another three chips, I am becoming concerned and am sensing this is not a situation that is going to end in a way which will see me finishing these chips. Little do I know, but it might not be a situation that ends in a way in which I finish the journey.

It goes quiet. Things are calmer. I can finish my chips in peace. Mako has finished his and his head is leaning back on the seat and his eyes are shut.

Sleep is a great idea right now. Sleep is always a great idea anytime. But it feels so right after chips. We're in the car, it's a long journey home, and there's nothing else to do anyway.

I lean my head back on the seat, just like Mako. It doesn't take long for my eyes to close. They're always up for a break too.

What was that? Nothing. It was me falling asleep. I'm drifting. Drifting off to sleep. This is nice. I can sleep 'til we get home. Lovely.

'What are you doing?' says my mum. 'Are you crazy? They're only kids!'

Who's she talking about? What's she talking about? Why am I thinking anything? Hang on, I'm awake. We must be home. I can see my dad and he's

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waking Mako up and getting him out of the car. So why's mum upset then? She never gets upset when we get home and get out of the car.

I rub my eyes. I do a double take out of the window. We're not home. We've stopped in the middle of the road for no reason I can think of.

Mako's out of the car, and suddenly my door is open and my dad is getting me out of the car and on to the road.

'Why are you doing this?' pleads my mum. 'They were sleeping!'

We're not sleeping anymore as I shiver a bit on the cold street.

I can feel my fear rising as my dad stands in front of us. What now?

'You two jog home in front of the car,' he says, as if that's the most natural thing in the world. As if that's the way we always finish our car journeys.

'Please don't make them do this,' says mum from the car.

'Jog home, I'll drive behind you,' he says.

I'm going to cry. I'm about to bawl my eight-year-old eyes out, because I know that this is so unfair and that other eight-year-olds don't have to do this. The kids in my school wouldn't even believe me if I told them I had to do this. Come to think of it, even I *don't believe I have to do this.*

I look at Mako and he's sobbing. It helps me to not cry because he is. He knows that it doesn't matter that I am eight and he is ten. We have to run. And we have to run now.

I set off behind Mako, in case he lashes out at me for going ahead of him because I'm a bit fitter and more mobile than him. I'm not saying I'm fit and mobile, just a bit more so than him.

I'm hating this whole thing, but I just want to get it done.

Mako is still crying. In the car behind us, my mum is crying as my dad

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drives painfully slowly while we run up the hill towards our house which must be around a mile away. But I'm eight and a mile doesn't really mean anything to me – it's a grown-up word and it could take us either two minutes or two hours to jog a mile. Who knows?

'Is my dad actually for real?' I think to myself as I listen to Mako's sobs in front of me, but I say nothing and just focus on getting home.

Hoots and beeps and all sorts come from the cars behind ours, but my dad doesn't care and crawls behind us as we run slowly towards home.

'This guy really is crazy,' I think. And I keep thinking it as we trot on and on and on. We are not adults. We may be the size of adults, but we are children, and this run kills more and more with every step.

We have just played a game of rugby. And eaten a portion of chips. And fallen asleep. Nobody in their right mind would go for a jog after that trilogy.

The ordeal lasts for what seems like hours, although it's probably over in little more than ten minutes. But it's horrible. It's awful. It's upsetting. It hurts.

But the truth is, without all those feelings, I won't get to become an international rugby player.

At the time, that was probably the worst day of my life. When you're a kid, you don't have any perspective. Now, I can laugh about it but I understand that's the way I deal with tough episodes from my childhood. The fact is, we had won the game that day playing for our team New Panteg

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Under-11s and we had both gone over twice. But we had also spent huge chunks of the afternoon aimlessly wandering around in our own half watching the action on the other side of the pitch. To us, that was rugby. When the ball came near us, we would perform. Whether that was steamrollering through opponents, or spinning a twenty-metre pass out to the back line – we were interested when play came to us.

The funny thing is I wasn't even supposed to be playing in this team. It was an Under-11 side and I was at least two years too young for it, but thanks to my size I could play alongside Mako and our mate Taulupe Faletau, or Toby as everyone in our adopted home town Pontypool knew him.

Toby played rugby differently to us back then. In fact, he played it pretty much the same way he plays it now. He followed play, chased after the ball, the game, the opposition, whatever it was – he chased it. He didn't stand around looking gormless in his own half, embarrassing his father.

And that was the point. My dad would have considered our performances humiliating to everything he stood for as a pro rugby player, a parent and proud Tongan. To my dad, it wasn't about scoring tries, winning matches and looking good. It was about how hard we worked, how much we wanted it and he felt we made him look stupid because his boys were just strolling around without a care in the world while everyone else was doing the hard work.

He was steaming way before the match had finished, let alone when we were in the car eating our chips. I wouldn't be surprised if my mum had had to stop him from making us run all the way home from the game. Although given that it was a forty-five-minute drive, that might have

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been a tad extreme, even for my dad. I think they both knew what he had up his sleeve, hence the front seat vocals on the way home.

When you're an eight-year-old, you only look at a small part of the picture, never the whole. That's why I can now say that what my dad did made me into an England rugby player. As hard as it would be for the eight-year-old me to see it, he was right. I may have learned the hard way, but I learned. When you run up a hill in front of your mum and dad's car after a game of rugby with your brother bawling alongside you, you're unlikely to stand around watching a game go by again.

Having said that, sometimes it took me longer to learn every lesson in life. When it came to discipline during my childhood, it's fair to say that I was something of a repeat offender. In fact, they could have locked me up and thrown away the key. Sometimes, or always, I just could not help myself. It was usually impulsive, silly behaviour rather than anything malevolent, but there would rarely be a day that went by without me getting involved in some kind of scrape, whether at school or home. Or both.

Unlike my erratic behaviour, my upbringing was a fairly simple Tongan one. Albeit a simple Tongan upbringing that was spent in Wales and then south west England. My life was all about three things: faith, family and rugby. In that order. Religion is at the heart of every Tongan family's life. Even more so with mine, as my mum eventually became a minister of her own church. In fact, she was the first Tongan to ever be ordained in the UK.

As a kid, Sundays were all about church and eating. You can't have one without the other. We'd all be kicked out of bed at 9am so we had time

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to get ready for church which started at 10.30am. And without fail, every single week we'd still manage to be late. But that's the Tongan style. Nothing starts at the time it's supposed to. Time is just not that important when you're on a small island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. We're just more laid back about that kind of thing.

Church would be followed by an enormous family feast. Back home in Tonga, that means pigs would be roasted in the underground ovens for six hours so that they would be ready by the time we returned from church. And then the feast would begin. In Pontypool, it was the same idea but it was just ever so slightly cold outside so there was less underground oven, and more 'get the hell indoors as soon as possible' because we were all so freezing.

But, somehow, despite the weather, we were able to carry on our traditional Tongan lifestyle here while also adapting to the customs of our newly adopted country. When my dad first set foot in Pontypool back in 1998, it was his first taste of life in the United Kingdom. He had grown up on a diet of amazing stories about the Great British Empire, how Captain Cook had turned up in Tonga in the eighteenth century, and the very strong impression Britain had made on him, and all his peers, in their youth.

In school, he was taught how Britain was viewed on a par with the Roman Empire. One of the greatest civilisations the world had known. The winners of the two world wars. Cook and Winston Churchill, the greatest of men. To my dad when he was an islander child, he might have considered it possible that he would one day visit New Zealand or Australia which were relatively close by. But he would never in his wildest dreams have conceived of seeing Britain at any point in his life. To him,

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Britain stood for everything that was just and right in the world. He imagined a vast, lush land of immense size and quality with polite, respectful and decent people.

Yet, as he looked around Pontypool twenty-five years later, with all due respect to our first port of call in wonderful Wales, he was bitterly disappointed. It was October, and the weather was foul. Grey skies offered no hint of redemption. A constant drizzle was in the air. But, worst of all, it was indescribably cold for a man who had no experience of a northern hemisphere late autumnal day.

He was alone at first, but eventually, me, Mako, my older sister Tiffany, my younger sister Ana and my mum all joined him so that we could be miserable and cold together. Which is a joke, of course. Growing up in Wales were some of the happiest times of my life. Faith, family and rugby were all we needed and we had plenty of all three.

I'm sitting at the dinner table chomping on some chicken. We're all there. Mum, Dad, Tiffany, Mako, Ana and me. Tonight, it's fried chicken and chips. It's so good. It's always so good. How can it not be good? There's lots of contented munching and crunching around the table. Mum and Dad look happy, but they're eating. They always look happy when they're eating. This is how it is every night. Our family sitting down together as one, to eat and talk.

The talking usually starts with the Devotion and tonight is no exception. It's Mako's turn, which means he chooses a verse from the bible and tells

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us what it means and why it's significant for him. We're kids, but we take this stuff seriously.

Mum's talking now.

'It's so nice to see you guys again. Thank God everyone is looking so healthy and we pray you stay that way.'

'Amen!' we chorus in response to my mum's prayer.

'Billy!' says my dad.

He says it in a way that suggests he may not be about to lavish praise upon me. To tell me what an exemplary child I am and how my teachers have been waxing lyrical about me. No, he says it in a way which means only one thing. Trouble.

'What have I done now?' I think.

A lot of things I have done immediately spring to mind, but I'm not about to volunteer any of them at this point. Let's just see where this is going.

'Yes, Dad,' I reply.

His stare is fixed on me. There is no escape.

'We got a letter from your school . . .'

OK, perhaps I've misjudged this one. Maybe it's not so bad after all. Someone might have seen fit to let my parents know that I'm actually quite bright, that I get on with everyone, and that I'm generally a decent student. 'Dear Mr & Mrs Vunipola, Just wanted to let you know that Billy is doing fine at school. Love, his teachers.' Yeah, that's exactly the sort of letter that the school usually takes the trouble to write to parents. What on earth am I thinking?

'It says you've been messing around again,' continues my dad as I look down, aware that everyone is looking at me. As if the school would write to

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my parents to tell them something good. I know how this ends, and it doesn't end well. The reason I know how this ends is because this happens fairly often. A casual observer would say this happens most evenings. It's almost funny. Almost.

'. . . you've been talking back to the teachers and playing the fool again,' he goes on, reading my charge sheet. But there won't be a trial. I won't be entitled to representation or a fair hearing. This case is closed. And I'm sentenced to the same punishment every time. A good hiding.

My mum takes out the wooden spoon and invites me into the other room. I follow her in, obediently hold out my hands, palms up, and wait for her to rap me hard.

As I wait, I realise it's this bit that's the worst. Don't get me wrong, I don't relish the pain and the sting on my hand when that spoon strikes. Far from it. But these moments, these split seconds, of the anticipation of the pain are somehow worse than actually being hit.

And now, as I stand waiting for the spoon, I'm thinking the same thing I always think. 'Why do I continue to do these stupid things?'

Yes, I'm guilty. That's why there's no need for a trial or any representations on my part. I'm guilty because I always do these daft things, and then immediately regret them. So why do I do them in the first place? I don't frigging know! If I knew that, I wouldn't do them and I wouldn't be standing here waiting for a wooden spoon to strike the palms of my han . . . Smash! The spoon comes down firmly on the tight skin of my right hand and I wince. The pain is sharp and stings like hell. It brings a tear to my eye.

I look at my mum. She has a face full of remorse, pity and sorrow but she sticks to her task as a parent solemnly and resolutely. My face is a sea of

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salty tears and as soon as we're done, I trudge off to my bedroom, disconsolate and distraught.

At around about that time, once I was safely on my bed with my head in my pillow, I would rage to nobody in particular about how much I hated my parents and threaten to call the NSPCC on them. I never did. I accepted the punishments for what they were. I may not be a parent, but I can now reflect that it takes a very different kind of love to discipline a child the way my parents disciplined me. My parents obviously loved me, but if they'd loved me too much and just let me do whatever the hell I wanted, that would not be love. That would be neglect.

I talk about it with my parents now and we laugh about it. For them, it was their upbringing. They grew up in very traditional Tongan families and were used to getting disciplined and told in no uncertain terms which things were right and wrong. I completely understand that kids are not being brought up like that anymore – kids at my school would say to me, 'Yeah, I got smacked on the bottom last night' and I'd come back to them with 'Mate, I wish I got smacked on the bottom.'

But despite the differences, I'm convinced the way I was brought up worked for me. I was hard to handle as a child. I was rebellious, cheeky and mischievous. I couldn't help myself. The truth is I was often just plain stupid and didn't think things through. My brother was way more calculating than me. Even nowadays, I sometimes say stupid stuff. But usually, I say it for a reaction. As a kid if you say something for a reaction, you'll

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normally get a big one, but as an adult nobody really cares what I say. Or at least they're too mature to over-react to it. I truly think that if I had never been disciplined in such a strong way by my parents, I have no idea exactly where I'd be right now, but you might find me living in a dumpster somewhere. I would almost certainly not be an international rugby player.

Ask him now, and my dad says he always knew Mako and I were capable of playing rugby at the highest level. It was in our genes, and as a professional himself, he knew how to guide us in the right direction. But in truth that was the last thing he wanted for us. What he really wanted when we were young, was for us to benefit from an amazing education and gain professional qualifications so we could become doctors, lawyers or teachers. That was my dad's dream. And that's why he did everything he could to dissuade us from pursuing a career in rugby – including making us run hill sprints in sub-freezing snow one evening.

The Rock slams his head into Triple H's chest, and my brother and I gasp with delight. We love this! Before we know it, Triple H has The Rock in a headlock, but The Rock escapes and punches H straight on the jaw.

'Woah!' says Mako.

'Sweet!' I say.

I don't understand how these guys don't get hurt more. There's never any blood. They must be superhuman.

Suddenly, we're on the floor in front of the telly that's still showing The Rock and Triple H grappling, but we're now wrestling ourselves and it's

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awesome as we roll all over the floor, trying to smash each other. This is the only thing that's actually better than watching wrestling. Although it does seem to hurt us a bit more than the guys on TV.

But it's such fun. And it doesn't really matter that we're supposed to be doing our homework right now.

The rules every day are the same. We chill out for a couple of hours after school and then do our homework at 6.30pm. It's now 7pm but what does that matter when we're wrestling?

I'm on the floor and Mako has climbed onto the sofa, in an attempt to replicate The People's Elbow, one of The Rock's signature moves. He launches himself off the couch with his arm at right angles, elbow protruding and makes the perfect landing – right on my throat.

'Arrrrgghhhhh!' I scream, at the precise moment that my dad says 'Kids! Get changed!'

Where the hell did he come from? And why do the people who The Rock elbows never get as hurt as I just did from Mako's elbow? Woah! Maybe Mako is stronger than The Rock? Awesome! Although my throat really hurts right now.

Hang on a sec. What did my dad just say? Did he say get changed? What's he talking about? I look up from the floor, still reeling a bit from The People's Elbow.

My dad is staring at us. He doesn't look angry, but he does look like he means business. My brain's trying to take in so many things at the moment.

'Get changed for what?' I say.

'We're going running,' says Dad.

There must be some mistake here. This can't be right. It's winter

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outside. Snow and ice, everything. We can barely get to school in the morning, never mind running. And I hate running anyway. I hate it in any weather.

'Dad, it's so cold!' I protest, as Mako heads off to get changed. Why does he just accept these things? Why doesn't he say stuff like me?

'Shouldn't you be doing your homework now? That's why we're going training. And you're not allowed to watch wrestling.'

He's right about the wrestling. A story did the rounds about a kid who got paralysed while trying to copy one of his favourite wrestler's signature moves and that was enough for it to be banned in our house.

While I ponder that, my mum starts screaming at my dad. Is this a reprieve for us? 'No! You can't take them running now,' she says. 'It's freezing, they'll catch colds.' I could've written her script. It's beautiful and perfect and it's going to get us out of a terrible ordeal. What's got into his head to even make him think this is a good idea?

Come on, Mum. We can do this.

'It's homework time and they were watching wrestling and fighting,' he says. 'They have to learn.'

What are we going to learn by running in the snow? That Wales is absolutely freezing in the winter? I already know that. I'm actually going to learn much more than that, but I don't know that. My mum doesn't know that. But it doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter because Dad has decided this is what's happening so it's happening. Nobody's going to change his mind.

Oh crap.

I get changed. We go outside. It's pitch black, freezing beyond belief,

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and sleet, hail and Lord knows what else are falling as we make our way to the foot of the hill behind our house.

The breath coming out of our mouths is visible. This was the same trick of nature that used to thrill me when we first arrived in the UK. I loved that, there was nothing cooler than being able to see your own breath. But there's nothing cool about it now. I don't want to see my own breath now, I want to go indoors. I'll do my homework if I have to, I just want to go indoors.

But this is going to happen. It is actually happening. I begin to cry. I'm just a kid, I don't want to do this. Mako is crying too, and my dad hugs us underneath his enormously broad shoulders. Our faces are protected from the elements by his armpits. But this is the only concession he will make.

'Dad, it's so cold!' pleads Mako, as the biting wind tears right through the three of us.

'I know,' he says.

He can't back down now. He can't show us any weakness. Especially as he's now feeling so vulnerable himself. I don't know this but on the inside, my dad is worried. He is so worried about how we are going to survive as a family. His contract with Pontypridd is almost up. It's a Thursday night and he's just found out that he's not playing on Saturday. Not just that, he's not even on the bench. He won't receive a match fee or a potential win bonus. He is confused and concerned. And he wants to teach us a lesson that being a rugby pro is tough, brutal and uncompromising. Like running up the steepest of hills in the worst of weather. Is this what we really need? At this moment, absolutely not.

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'You do it ten times, I'll do twenty,' he says as we look up at the hill through wet eyes of sleet, snow and tears.

Oh crap. Here we go. We are actually doing this. This is crazy. Crazier than running a mile home in front of a car? Yeah, I think so. My dad speeds ahead, Mako and I follow, still crying. At the side of the hill, there is a church with a fence surrounding it. Each time we run up, we take cover behind the fence before running back down again. My dad knows we're doing this but seems to accept it. Maybe he realises how hard it is just to make it to the fence.

Every step up the hill is hell. Every step down is treacherous. The wind, rain, sleet and snow are as relentless as the hill is steep. But we persevere in the dark. We have no choice anyway.

There is never a point where I think that this is OK, and we're going to do it, or it's not actually that bad. That never happens. It's a continuous procession of misery and pain. I try to focus on just getting it done, with each step knowing that I am a tiny bit closer to the cosy warmth of our house. At least I'm with Mako, we can help each other. But it doesn't help. I still have to do it.

We make it up and down five times. Then six times, then seven. I know it's nearly done. But that still doesn't make the next time any easier. It's actually harder because I'm exhausted. Because about half-an-hour ago I was watching wrestling with Mako and was not prepared for this in any way.

I think about The Rock as we make it eight times. What would he do? He'd give my dad The People's Elbow. I wonder if it would hurt my old man?

I think it's getting colder. I can feel it actually turning far colder than

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it was when we came out here. We've barely broken a sweat because it's so cold. This might be dangerous. I don't know why, but it feels like it might be.

We've done it nine times and this is now the last time up and down. Once again, that doesn't help. It's harder than any of the previous nine. I think of The Rock. I think of elbows. I think of warmth.

And now it's over. With the help of that fence, it's over. My dad has powered through double the amount in the same time as we did our repeats. It's over. At last, it's over.

We're back indoors to find that welcoming cosy warmth. A place where an eight-year-old and a ten-year-old should be, on a night like this.

My dad is talking to us, explaining why he did something so crazy, so terrifying and so traumatic that I will never forget it for the rest of my life.

'Guys, I want you to focus on school, not rugby,' he says.

'What's he talking about?' I think. 'I love rugby. This doesn't seem to make any sense. Do I want to be a rugby player if I have to do this?'

'If you want to choose rugby, this is what you have to go through,' he tells us. He should know, he is a rugby player.

'Why don't you just sit down in the warmth, with a cup of tea and revise school work instead? It's so much easier than rugby with all that running and getting hurt. And you won't have to worry about the security of your next contract and feeding your families when you're grown up.'

My dad's motivations are clear. He wants us to choose the safe bet.

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And he's right. What he's saying makes so much sense. But sense doesn't matter with something like this.

I want to be a rugby player. He's way too late. We are already hooked. We never miss training. We have a rugby ball in our hands most of the time, day and night. We are going to be rugby players. We know it and he knows it.

In actual fact, my dad's brutal plan to scare us off from focusing on rugby had quite the opposite effect. He forced us to make a choice at a very young age and we emphatically chose rugby. So we ran and we ran and we ran. And then we ran some more. We hated it, but it didn't matter because we had chosen rugby. We had been offered an alternative but we signed up for the oval ball, and we did as we were told because my dad knew what he was doing. Those ridiculous hill sprints in the snow were a major turning point. They still motivate me to this day and remind me of what I had to go through to move up the rugby ladder. They also make me think of the sacrifices my family made for us to help realise our dreams. My dad put up with so much.

He didn't realise it then, but coping with the awful weather and alien surroundings of his new home in South Wales when he first arrived on his own in 1998 was already part of our story. His plan at that time was to stay for a couple of months, play professional rugby for Pontypool, then return home to Tonga and take his whole family to Sydney, Australia, where he had a scholarship place waiting for him to study for his Masters

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degree in building economics. Sydney over Pontypool? It seemed like a solid plan to me.

But life is unpredictable – this was the first time my dad had ever been paid to play rugby. Back home, he'd represented and captained our country and relished the honour, but the attraction for him was that rugby was a hobby, something to go alongside his profession as a quantity surveyor. It was also a way to see the world, and playing for Tonga had taken him to the places he wanted to see, including South Africa.

After that South African tour, my old man was one of ten Tongans who were offered representation by Phil Kingsley-Jones, the agent of All Black god Jonah Lomu, who had arranged the trip and brought over Lomu's people to help Tonga develop as a rugby nation. As well as being the most famous rugby player in history, the late great Lomu was of Tongan extraction which was to prove hugely influential in the path of our family, because around a year later, Kingsley-Jones set up the deal for my dad to come over to Britain and play for Pontypool. At the time, he was thirty-two and coming to the end of his career, but there was a World Cup in the UK around the corner and, as it was a country he had always wanted to see, he opted to pop over and play for a bit. But he was almost denied entry to the UK, thanks to his persistent honesty.

Dad received his contract from his agent, but not his work permit. He was sent a plane ticket and told he could come into the UK as a visitor from Tonga, so all would be fine. He boarded the plane, flew 10,000 miles and went back thirteen hours in time only to find that British Customs officials wanted a word with him. Being a truthful man, my dad answered

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their question of why he had come to their country by explaining that he was here to play rugby.

'Have you got a visa?' they asked.

'I don't need a visa,' he replied, incorrectly.

'No, you don't need a visa as a visitor, but if you are here to play rugby then you must have a visa.'

'I'm sorry, I don't have one.'

'Well, in that case, you're going back to Tonga.'

'Well, in that case, it doesn't matter. I'm here because I wanted to have a look around the country but now I know that you're not nice people, I want to go back!'

This took the Customs officials by surprise: 'Is that right?'

'I came all the way, I wanted to see Great Britain, but now I'll go back and take my family to Australia.'

'Are you sure? You said you came here to play rugby and now you want to go back?'

'I do want to play rugby, but I don't have the visa. My agent is outside and I think he's got my work permit.'

'Do you have his number?'

'Yeah.'

At this point, Customs called Phil Kingsley-Jones, who was waiting in the airport to meet my dad, he handed over my dad's work permit, and he was then allowed to stay. The first Vunipola to set foot in Britain.

'You're the first man who came here and said he wants to go back!' laughed the Customs official as my dad entered the country.

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'Well, I didn't know you were going to be this rude!'

'No, we were doing our job.' And they were right.

Apart from UK Customs and Jonah Lomu, my late grandfather Sione also played a pretty significant part in our journey to the UK. He was also a rugby player in his spare time, and turned out for Tonga against the All Blacks in the 1970s, when he wasn't being a policeman back home. He had a dream. Not like a Martin Luther King dream, but a fairly big dream all the same, which was for us to relocate to the UK because of the opportunities that awaited us there. He never got to see me and Mako pull on England shirts, but I know how proud he would've been and I'm sure he's watching our every move. But we might only have been putting England shirts on ourselves as fans, had my dad not listened to Sione.

In the first instance, before most of us had even visited the UK, it was my dad's dad who had practically pushed us the thousands of miles over there. While my dad was struggling in Pontypool, Sione was preaching in our church and announced in front of the entire congregation that we would all be joining my dad over in Wales. Well, that was news to us! But it worked. It was all anyone from the church could talk about, and it quickly became a fact. We were soon on our way.

Sione was at it again a few years later, when we'd all returned to Tonga for a holiday which dad was planning on making permanent. At that point, Dad had had enough of the UK. He'd had to fight so hard for every rugby contract with Pontypool and subsequently Pontypridd. My mum wasn't working, my dad was sending money back to his parents in Tonga and it was a struggle for him to make ends meet. Life back in Tonga would've been so much easier for him. He would've had a comfortable

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lifestyle with a good job waiting for him, a house and a mortgage. What more could he have wanted?

'It's a hard life there, I'm coming to the end of my career and I feel like giving up,' Dad told Sione one day. 'I want to stay here and practice as a quantity surveyor.' Sione never said a word. Later that night, when we had our family prayer gathering, Sione said he had been surprised by what Dad had said about returning to Tonga permanently. And the words he spoke then, were words that would stay with my dad for the rest of his life. When my dad recalled them to me years later, he had tears in his eyes.

'If I was given the opportunity to raise my family in Great Britain in my lifetime, I would fight tooth and nail to do so,' said Sione. 'This is the chance of a lifetime for an ordinary Tongan. The only Tongans who have the opportunity to even visit the UK are the royal family or government ministers. You have this chance, so you must struggle and you must fight, because I know you have it in you to do this for your children.'

It was the moment that changed everything. From that point on, whatever my dad did was going to be for his dad and for us. Our trip back to Tonga would remain as just a holiday, because we were heading back to Britain for the rest of our lives.

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