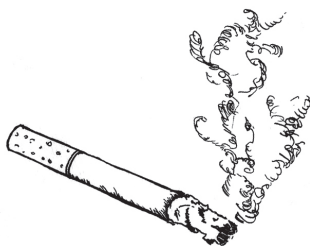


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I

*2 April 1980*

No one has to tell Leon that this is a special moment. Everything else in the hospital seems to have gone quiet and disappeared. The nurse makes him wash his hands and sit up straight.

‘Careful, now,’ she says. ‘He’s very precious.’

But Leon already knows. The nurse places the brand-new baby in his arms with its face towards Leon so that they can look at each other.

‘You have a brother now,’ she says. ‘And you’ll be able to look after him. What are you? Ten?’

‘He’s nearly nine,’ says Leon’s mum, looking over. ‘Eight years and nine months. Nearly.’

Leon’s mum is talking to Tina about when the baby was coming out, about the hours and the minutes and the pain.

‘Well,’ says the nurse, adjusting the baby’s blanket, ‘you’re nice and big for your age. A right little man.’

She pats Leon on his head and brushes the side of his cheek with her finger. ‘He’s a beauty, isn’t he? Both of you are.’

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She smiles at Leon and he knows that she's kind and that she'll look after the baby when he isn't there. The baby has the smallest fingers Leon has ever seen. He looks like a doll with its eyes closed. He has silky white hair on the very top of his head and a tiny pair of lips that keep opening and closing. Through the holey blanket, Leon can feel baby warmth on his belly and his legs and then the baby begins to wriggle.

'I hope you're having a nice dream, baby,' Leon whispers.

After a while, Leon's arm begins to hurt and just when it gets really bad the nurse comes along. She picks the baby up and tries to give him to Leon's mum.

'He'll need feeding soon,' she says.

But Leon's mum has her handbag on her lap.

'Can I do it in a minute? Sorry, I was just going to the smoking room.'

She moves off the bed carefully, holding on to Tina's arm, and shuffles away.

'Leon, you watch him, love,' she says, hobbling off.

Leon watches the nurse watching his mother walk away but when she looks at Leon she's smiling again.

'I tell you what we'll do,' she says, placing the baby in the crib next to the bed. 'You stay here and have a little chat to your brother and tell him all about yourself. But when your mummy comes back it will be time for his feed and you'll have to get off home. All right, sweetheart?'

Leon nods. 'Shall I wash my hands again?' he asks, showing her his palms.

'I think you'll be all right. You just stand here and if he starts crying, you come and fetch me. Okay?'

'Yes.'

Leon makes a list in his head and then starts at the beginning.

'My name is Leon and my birthday is on the fifth of July nineteen seventy-one. Your birthday is today. School's all right but you have to go nearly every day and Miss Sheldon won't let proper footballs in the playground. Nor bikes but I'm too tall

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for mine anyway. I've got two Easter eggs and there's toys inside one of them. I don't think you can have chocolate yet. The best programme is *The Dukes of Hazzard* but there are baby programmes as well. I don't watch them any more. Mum says you can't sleep in my room till you're older, about three, she said. She's bought you a shopping basket with a cloth in it for your bed. She says it's the same basket Moses had but it looks new. My dad had a car with no roof and he took me for a drive in it once. But then he sold it.'

Leon doesn't know what to say about the baby's dad because he has never seen him so he talks about their mother.

'You can call her Carol if you like, when you can talk. You probably don't know but she's beautiful. Everyone's always saying it. I think you look like her. I don't. I look like my dad. Mum says he's coloured but Dad says he's black but they're both wrong because he's dark brown and I'm light brown. I'll teach you your colours and your numbers because I'm the cleverest in my class. You have to use your fingers in the beginning.'

Leon carefully feels the downy fluff on the baby's head.

'You've got blonde hair and she's got blonde hair. We've both got thin eyebrows and we've both got long fingers. Look.'

Leon holds his hand up. And the baby opens his eyes. They are a dusty blue with a deep black centre, like a big full stop. The baby blinks slowly and makes little kissing noises with his mouth.

'Sometimes she takes me to Auntie Tina up on the next landing. I can walk up to Auntie Tina's on my own but if you come, I'll have to carry you in the basket.'

The baby won't be able to speak until it's much bigger so Leon just carries on.

'I won't drop you,' he says. 'I'm big for my age.'

He watches the baby blowing him kisses and leans into the crib and touches the baby's lips with his fingertip.

His mum and Tina and the nurse come back all at the same time. Leon's mum comes straight over to the crib and puts her arm round Leon. She kisses his cheek and his forehead.

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‘Two boys,’ she says. ‘I’ve got two beautiful, beautiful boys.’

Leon puts his arms round his mum’s waist. She’s still got a round belly like the baby was still in there and she smells different. Or maybe it’s just the hospital. All the baby-ness made Leon’s mum puffed out and red in the face and now she’s near back to being herself again. Everything except the belly. He carefully touches his mother through her flowery nightie.

‘Are there any more in there?’ he says.

The nurse and Tina and his mum all laugh at the same time.

‘That’s men for you,’ says the nurse. ‘All charm.’

But Leon’s mum bends down and puts her face close to Leon.

‘No more,’ she says. ‘Just me and you and him. Always.’

Tina puts her coat on and leaves ten cigarettes on the bed for Carol to have later.

‘Thanks, Tina,’ she says, ‘and thanks for having Leon again. Think I’ll be out on Tuesday by the sound of it.’

Carol shuffles up in the bed and the nurse puts the baby in her arms. He is making little breathing noises that sound like the beginning of a cry. Leon’s mum begins to unfasten her cardigan.

‘Isn’t he lovely, Leon? You be good, all right?’ and she kisses him again.

The whole of the baby’s head fits into her hand.

‘Come to Mummy,’ she whispers and cradles him against her chest.

Tina’s flat is very different to Leon’s but it’s exactly the same as well. Both maisonettes have two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs and a kitchen and living room downstairs.

Leon’s house is on the ground floor of the first block by the dual carriageway and Tina’s house is up on the next landing. The dual carriageway has three rows of traffic on each side and the cars go so fast that they put a barrier up by the pavement. Now if Leon and Carol want to cross the road, they have to walk for ages to go to a

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crossing and press a button and wait until it starts to beep. The first time it was exciting but now it just makes it longer to get to school in the morning.

Tina lets Leon sleep in the same bedroom as her baby. She always makes a bouncy, comfortable bed when Leon stays. She takes two cushions off the sofa and then wraps them in a blanket and puts a little baby's quilt over him. When he is lying down she throws some coats on top and covers everything over with a bedspread. It's like a nest or a den because no one would know he was there, like camouflage in the jungle. His bed looks like a pile of clothes in the corner but then 'AAAGGGH', there is a monster underneath and it jumps up and kills you. Tina always leaves the light on in the hall but tells him he has to be very quiet because of her baby.

Her baby is big and wobbly and his name suits him. Bobby. Wobbly Bobby. His head is too big for his body and when Leon plays with him, he always gets some of Bobby's dribble on his hand. Bobby's Wobbly Dribble. Leon's brother won't be like Bobby and just suck on his plastic toys all day and get his bib soaking wet. He won't topple over on the sofa under the weight of his big head and just stay there till someone moves him. Leon always sits Bobby up but then Bobby thinks it's a game and keeps on doing it.

Bobby loves Leon. He can't talk and, anyway, he always has a dummy in his mouth but as soon as Leon walks in the door, Bobby wobbles across the carpet and holds Leon's legs. Then he puts out his arms for Leon to pick him up. When Leon's brother is older they're going to play together, soldiers and Action Man. They're going to both have machine guns and run all over the house shooting at targets. Bobby can watch.

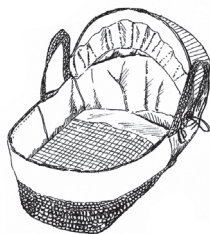
Tina's house always has a window open and smells of baby lotion. Tina looks a bit like a baby herself because she's got a round face with puffy cheeks and round eyes that bulge. She makes her hair different colours all the time but she's never happy with it and Carol keeps telling her to go blonde.

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Tina always says, 'If I had your face, Carol, it wouldn't matter so much,' and Leon thinks she's right.

Tina has a leather sofa that is cold and slippery on Leon's legs and a sheepskin rug in front of the gas fire and a massive telly. She doesn't let Leon call her 'Tina', like he calls his mum 'Carol'. He has to call her 'Auntie Tina' and he has to call Carol 'Mum' because she says children have to have respect. And she doesn't let Leon eat in front of the telly. He has to sit at a wooden table in the kitchen where there isn't much room because she has a big fridge-freezer with ice cream in it. Bobby sits in his high chair smiling at Leon and Tina puts two scoops in Leon's bowl and one for Bobby. Leon's brother will probably only get half a scoop because he'll be the smallest.

Sometimes, Tina's boyfriend comes, but when he sees Leon he always says, 'Again?' and Tina says, 'I know.'



2

The first day when Carol brings the baby home, Tina and Leon and Bobby are waiting by the door. Carol holds the basket carefully with both hands and walks in whispering, 'He's just gone off.'

She puts the baby on the floor in the living room and Leon tiptoes over. The baby has grown and his face looks different. He's wearing a new outfit in pale blue with a matching hat and he has a yellow fluffy blanket over his legs. Tina and Bobby go home and Carol and Leon sit on the carpet and watch the baby. They watch the baby turn his head and open his lips. They watch the baby move one of his miniature hands and when the baby yawns they both open their mouths and yawn with him.

Carol tilts her head.

'Isn't he beautiful?' she says.

'Yes.'

Leon and Carol lean back against the sofa and hold hands.

'Aren't we lucky?' she says.

All that day and the next day, the baby is like the television.

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Leon can't stop watching him and all his baby movements. He hardly cries and when he does it sounds like a little kitten or a puppy. He watches Carol change the baby on a special plastic mat that's got rocking horses on it. The baby has got a really small willy but big balls. Leon hopes the baby's willy will catch up. Babies' poo is a funny colour – it's not brown, it's greeny yellow – and Carol has to wipe all the poo off with special new baby lotion. Carol and Leon bath the baby together. Carol holds him in a few inches of water and Leon splashes his belly and his bum. The baby's got a special white towel all to himself and when he's wrapped in it, Leon thinks he looks like the Baby Jesus in his manger. Maybe that's why his mum bought him Moses' basket, because he's come from God.

The baby blinks slowly and stares at Leon like he's trying to work out who he is.

'I'm your brother,' says Leon. 'Big brother.'

The baby doesn't say anything back.

'Big. Brother,' says Leon. 'My. Name. Is. Leon. I am eight and three quarters. I am a boy.'

The baby stretches himself out to say he understands.

Leon tells everybody at school about his new brother. His teacher says he can tell the class so Leon stands up after assembly.

'I've got a new baby brother. He's really small and he sleeps nearly all the time. That's normal because he's concentrating on growing. My mum says all babies are different, some sleep and some cry. She said that when I was a baby I was as good as gold except when I was hungry. I'm the one in charge of my baby when Mum's not there. When the baby was born he had a funny-shaped head but now his head has gone round again.'

Everyone claps and then Leon draws a picture and takes it home. His mum puts it on the fridge with a magnet next to a proper photograph that Tina took at the hospital.

After a few weeks, Carol says Leon can't go to school because it's too wet and rainy. That means Leon can play all day and put the

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television on and make toast if he's hungry. Carol leaves him in charge when she goes to the phone box and when she comes back she's out of breath and asks him if the baby's all right. Leon would never let anything happen to the baby so she worries for nothing.

When Tina comes round she knocks the door and then lets herself in with a key. She always, always says the same thing – 'Cal? It's me, Tina. Only Tina' – and when Leon was little he thought that 'Only Tina' was her name. She brings loads and loads of clothes from Bobby and a bagful of toys. Some of the toys are quite good even though they are for little kids and Leon hides the best ones in his room.

Tina and his mum are in the kitchen.

'You still look tired, Cal. Is the baby keeping you up?'

Tina sounds like the nurse at the hospital, a little bit bossy. Carol starts crying. She's always crying these days.

'It's not like last time. I just feel sort of down, you know. I'm all right, it's just things getting on top of me.'

Tina is saying 'Sssh' all the time and then he can hear her making a cup of tea. Sometimes when Tina comes to Leon's house she does the washing-up as well and makes him beans on toast.

'Get yourself to the doctor, Cal. Honest, you've got to.'

'I will, I will.'

'You've got Leon to think of as well as the baby.'

'Leon's all right,' Carol says with a sniff. 'He's a good kid, just gets on with it. He loves the baby, he really does, but everything else goes over his head. All he thinks about is guns and cars.'

'You eating?'

'Byron came round every day when Leon was a baby. He used to do all the cooking. He was great with Leon as well. Gave me a bit of a break.'

Leon can hear Tina running the tap and moving the dishes into the sink.

'If it was me, Cal, I'd see the doctor.'

'Then when he went inside and I got depressed, they wanted me

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to go to some bloody centre twice a week. Me with a baby at home, feeling like shit. Feeling like this.'

'I'll come with you if you like. Bobby's in nursery every morning now. We could go first thing.'

'Them tablets gave me nightmares as well.'

'You need something, Cal.'

'I know.'

Later, when Leon's in bed, Carol comes into his room.

'I've just got him off to sleep,' she says and sits down. 'Did he wake you up?'

'I can't sleep, Mum.'

'Try,' she says.

'I can't. Can I have a story?'

Carol says nothing for a few moments and he thinks she might say no or that she's too tired but she takes a deep breath and starts.

'This is a story my dad used to tell me.'

'Is it scary?'

'Scary?' Carol shakes her head and smiles. 'No, listen. Once upon a time there was a mother with two boys, one was a baby. The oldest boy was very noisy. He had a very loud voice and he used to shout and bang his drum and kick the door and sing at the top of his voice and the mother used to tell him off. "Ssssh," she would say, "you'll wake the baby." And the boy's teacher would say, "Ssssh, we can't do our lessons." And the minister at church would say, "Ssssh. We're in a holy place." And the boy felt lonely like nobody loved him. He decided to run away. But when he got to the edge of the village, he saw a big bad wolf coming to eat everyone up. He was too far away to run back and warn everyone so he opened his mouth as wide as he could and he roared, "THERE'S A WOLF COMING!" And he saved the whole village and his mother and his brother and nobody ever told him to be quiet again.'

'Is that the end?'

'Yes. They all lived happily ever after. Sleep time now. Snuggle

down. School tomorrow, sweetheart,' she says and strokes his forehead.

'Am I sick? I might be sick,' he says.

'No, you're not sick. Definitely school tomorrow.'

Carol says this every night but it's been five days since Leon went to school.

'If you don't go to school you won't learn anything, Leon. If you don't learn anything you can't get a good job and a nice house and lots of toys. You like toys, don't you? I saw you! I saw those toys you took up to your room! Eh? Eh?'

Carol starts scrabbling her fingers on his chest, making him laugh.

'And anyway, you get bored at home and drive me potty.'

'I can help with the baby,' Leon says.

'Jake. His name is Jake.'

'You said -'

'It's his dad's middle name. Well, I changed Jack to Jake because I like it better. Do you, Leon?'

She kisses him before she turns off the light but Leon doesn't kiss her back. She promised he could call the baby Bo from *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Bo's got a red car and blonde hair. His real name is Beauregard Duke and he's the best one in the whole programme. Jake-regard sounds stupid. Leon doesn't know anyone at school called Jake and no one off the telly called Jake. There is a shop on the other side of the dual carriageway called 'Jake's Bakes' where they sell pies and chips and when the baby goes to school he's going to get teased about it. Leon wonders if he can get his mum to change her mind. Jake is the worst name he's ever heard.



3

Leon has begun to notice the things that make his mum cry: when Jake makes a lot of noise; when she hasn't got any money; when she comes back from the phone box; when Leon asks too many questions; and when she's staring at Jake.

It's the third night that Leon and Jake are both sleeping at Tina's. It keeps happening all the time. Carol takes them up to Tina's and then she leaves them there for a few days. Last week it was two nights and before that it was three nights and sometimes it feels like they're never going home. Jake's basket goes next to Leon's den bed. Leon watches Jake for a few minutes because he makes special whistling noises when he breathes out and he makes his little hands into fists like Muhammad Ali. Jake opens his eyes and doesn't even cry. His eyes have become bright, zingy blue but the middle is still perfectly black, like a drop of ink in the sea. Leon and Jake like to just look at each other for a while and then Leon sings a baby song or whispers something.

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‘Are you all right, Jake? Sleepy time, sleepy time. Close your eyes. You’re all right, Jakey. It’s all right. Sleepy time, Jakey.’

It’s peaceful and cosy in the bedroom with Jake and Wobbly Bobby and the heavy weight of the coats. He watches the smear of light on the wall, listens to the babies breathing, hears the sizzling tyres on the wet road outside.

The next day Carol comes to collect them from Tina’s. She sounds excited and happy and stays for ages in Tina’s kitchen so Leon creeps into the hall.

‘I found him. Yeah, I went to his mate’s house and I just kept knocking. I knew someone was in and I shouted through the letter box that I just wanted to give him a message. I kept on knocking and then he answered the door. Tony did. Just like that. I was really surprised. So was he. I told you he wasn’t avoiding me. He just didn’t realize I was due. I mean, I told him but he forgot. He said he was working away. And anyway, he’s not very good with dates.’

Tina isn’t asking questions like she usually does. So Carol just carries on.

‘He said he couldn’t talk for long because he had to get home. He’s still living with that cow but I don’t know why he’s still with her. Neither does he. I told him he could move in with us. I know he wants to see Jake but he’s got to be careful cos if she finds out she’ll stop him seeing his little girl and he dotes on her. She’s done it before, she just uses his daughter to keep him. I’d never do that.’

Tina offers Carol a biscuit. Tina’s biscuit tin is always crammed full. Sometimes if there are lots of broken ones, she lets Leon pick them all out and eat them.

‘No, thanks. Anyway, he said he’s moving out. She doesn’t know and he’s not letting on until he’s got everything in place. At his age, he wants to settle down for good.’

‘His age?’

‘He’s thirty-nine. You’d never know it, though. He’s not old or anything.’

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‘He’s nearly forty.’

‘Thirty-nine. Honest, he doesn’t look it. He looks our age.’

‘Twenty-five?’

‘Well, you know, early thirties, but anyway, yeah, he said it hasn’t been right for years between them. You know me, Tina. I never meant to hurt anyone but he wasn’t happy even before he met me. If he was, he wouldn’t have given me a second look, would he? He told me once he’s got family in Bristol and Wolverhampton so he’s not sure where he’s going but when he gets there, it’s gonna be just me and him.’

‘And the kids,’ says Tina.

‘Yeah, of course. That’s what he means. Me, him and the kids.’

‘What about his daughter?’

‘She’ll come as well.’

‘Right,’ says Tina after a while. ‘And he told you that?’

‘We only had a few minutes but yeah.’

Leon goes back into the living room to check on Jake in his basket. He’s nearly four months old and he’s getting too big for his basket. He keeps hitting himself on the side and trying to get out and then he gets angry and makes noises like a cat. Leon got told off for trying to help him stand up so Leon just watches now and tells Jake about different things he thinks he should know, like who is the best football player. But he doesn’t feel like telling Jake about living with a girl and a cow in Bristol because Jake would probably start to cry.



4

Leon eats his toast sitting on the carpet by the patio doors. It's supposed to be summertime but the sky is the same colour as the garden slabs, dull and grey, like the road to school, the cut-through to the precinct or the dirty lane between the tower blocks and maisonettes.

There's a bundle of wood in one corner of the yard like someone was once going to repair the fence but forgot. Instead, the people in the maisonette next door have mended the hole with barbed wire because of their dog and the argument they had with Leon's dad when he used to live with them. Leon's dad stood in the garden, pointed his finger and said (and Leon can remember it word for word), 'If that fucking beast gets into this yard and bites my kid, I'll rip its fucking heart out, all right, Phil?'

The dog is called Samson and it has no fur on its chest because of a fight. Instead, it has a bald circle of pink skin and Leon imagines its little dog heart beating underneath and his dad's hands

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grabbing Samson's front paws and tearing them apart until the dog howls.

Leon knows the sound of a howling dog and when he sees Samson in next-door's garden, he stands and they look at each other through the rusty barbed-wire hole.

But today Samson isn't in his yard and Leon sits with his old Action Man and his new Action Man on the back step. Carol bought the new Action Man for Leon's birthday at the beginning of July and Tina bought the Action Man outfit. His dad sent him a card with some money in it so Leon bought a better outfit with jackboots and a gun. When it's Christmas Leon wants two more Action Men with army uniforms. That will make four altogether and if he keeps going he will have a whole Action Man army.

Leon hears the doorbell and a man's voice. He picks up his new Action Man and they both crawl on their elbows, along the carpet, behind the sofa, and look through the gap in the door. A man is in the doorway letting cold air rush in. He's chunky and tall, wearing a long, black leather coat with a suit on underneath like he's the bad guy from James Bond. And from the way he has his hands in his pockets, he might also have a gun.

If he has got a gun and he tries to shoot, Leon will kick the door off the hinges and attack him before he can pull the trigger. Leon knows the moves people make before they shoot, like in westerns when they put their hands out to the side. Or, if Tina is in, Leon could rush past the man and ask her to come and help. Or ring the police. Leon wishes he didn't always need the toilet when he gets excited or frightened. He bunches his trousers at the front and squeezes his crotch into the carpet to stop the wee coming out. The man speaks slowly with his head on one side like his mum is a baby or she's a bit slow.

'Don't make this into something it ain't, Carol.'

Carol's crying and saying 'Tony' all the time but the man isn't listening.

'I'm married. Good as. I didn't want another kid and I don't want another girlfriend. I don't want someone ringing the house

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all the time and I don't want someone visiting my friends and making a fuss.'

Carol's making gulping noises.

'Didn't I say that already?' the man says, still with his head on one side and still with his hand on the invisible gun.

'Don't pass messages to all my mates neither. It's pissing me off. Just leave it, Carol.'

Carol starts speaking a few times but she can't get her breath so her words come out lumpy and wrong.

'You haven't even laid eyes on him yet, Tony. What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to think when you can't even be bothered to buy him a rattle?'

'Come off it, love. You saying this is about money?'

Carol's head shakes from side to side.

'No,' he continues, 'this is about the bollocks you've been telling yourself to cover a couple of months shagging in the back of my car, isn't it?'

Carol says nothing.

'I don't know what it is about you, Carol. Even with snot on your face you're a proper beautiful bird but you've got a brain like a rusty motor.'

The man takes one of his hands out of his pocket and taps the side of his head.

'Yeah, rusty. As in not working. No MOT. Breaking down. Not getting you from A to B. Worse than that, it's making A. Terrible. Fucking. Racket.'

Leon and Carol both hear it at the same time. They hear the man's voice go from soft to hard. Leon can tell Carol hears it because she jerks her head like he's slapped her. Leon stands up and holds his Action Man in both hands.

'Listen, I'm not a bastard. All right? But start behaving yourself, for fuck's sake. No more of these bloody phone calls. Here.'

The man puts his hand inside his jacket pocket.

'Take this for the kid and get on with your life. Get yourself a nice boy that sells vacuums or used tyres. Someone that finishes

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work at five thirty and takes you to bingo. All right? It's not me, love. It's just not me.'

He tries to give something to Carol but instead she runs into the living room, straight past Leon, picks Jake out of his basket and dashes back to the front door.

'He's yours, Tony, and you don't even care. Can't you even come in, for pity's sake? Spend some time with him.'

The man takes a step to the side and, as he does, he sees Leon. He winks and makes two of his fingers into the barrel of a gun that he points at Action Man and goes, 'Pouf.' Leon smiles. Then the man puts his head on the side again.

'Stop it, Carol,' he says. 'There's nothing more to be said.'

He takes a step back and closes the door. Carol turns round and screams at Leon.

'What are you doing listening? If you hadn't been sneaking around he would have come in and spent two minutes with his only son. Why are you so fucking nosy, Leon? Eh? You're always creeping around, listening to things. Go to bed and stay there!'

Leon tiptoes upstairs into the bathroom and tries to be quiet by weeing on the side of the pan. He doesn't flush and he doesn't wash his hands. He tries to count all the triangles on the wallpaper in his room but there are too many. He divides them up into dark blue and light blue triangles and makes a pattern in the shape of a tank by squeezing his eyes together and looking through his eyelashes. Carol used to say sorry when she shouted at him but she forgets all the time these days so tomorrow he's going to take some money out of her purse. He'll buy a Twix on his way back from school and he will throw the paper on the ground because he doesn't care.

Leon feels bad about smiling at the man that made Carol cry but if he comes back maybe they can both have pretend guns and shoot each other. Then again, he hopes that Jake won't grow up to be like his dad and say dangerous things in a quiet voice. Leon only smiled because it was polite. If the man comes back, Leon won't

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smile a second time. He will be on his guard and he'll protect Carol and Jake and then he won't get shouted at.

The next day his mum gets up early in the morning and says everything is going to be different. She says she's really sorry and she's going to try harder so she makes a massive breakfast with pancakes and syrup like she saw in a recipe book. It doesn't taste nice and she starts crying when Leon doesn't eat it all. She mashes one up with some milk for Jake but as soon as she puts it in his mouth he's sick all over his top. She makes Leon promise to go to school so he can be clever and not have a life like she has.

'I want better for my boys,' she says when Leon's hugging her on the settee. 'I want you both to have lovely lives and lots of beautiful things. I want you to live in a posh house with a proper garden and want you to always love each other. I don't want any arguments. I'm so tired of arguments. And I want you to get out of this shithole. Get right out of it, far as you can. Don't look back. So you have to learn things and get an education. Don't be like me or your dad. You're so clever, Leon. Promise me something, sweetheart?'

'Yes, Mum.'

'Look after him and look after yourself. Get something more out of life.'

'Okay, Mum.'

'Both of you. Do it for both of you.'

She squeezes Leon so tight he has to push her away a little bit because he can't breathe.

'I'm going up now, love. Look after Jake for me.'

Some days Leon doesn't go to school at all, just stays at home with Jake while their mum sleeps. But when he does go, Leon has to wake his mum up before he leaves to remind her about Jake. Sometimes she tells him to go away and he spends the whole day thinking about Jake's dinner or Jake's nap-time. But other times, like when he's playing football or something, he forgets all about what's happening at home. Like when there was a new boy at school

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and the teacher told Leon to look after him at lunchtime. The new boy was much smaller than Leon and he looked scared. Leon told him where everything was and then they had to queue up for their dinner. The new boy was called Adam and he had long hair. He said his dad was a teacher at another school. He said he had a dog.

‘What sort of dog?’ said Leon. ‘Is it an Alsatian or a Dobermann?’

‘It’s a poodle,’ he said. ‘It’s my mum’s. She calls it Candy.’

‘Oh,’ said Leon. ‘A poodle.’

‘Yeah, but I’ve trained it to bite people.’

‘Really?’

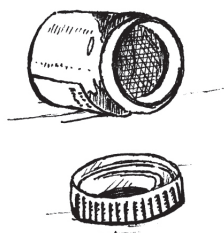
‘Yeah. I could bring it into school and get it to bite everyone in the class.’

‘Could you?’

‘Yeah. If I wanted.’

They spent the whole afternoon telling each other about training dogs and how sharp dog’s teeth were and which dog was the best. Poodles didn’t come into the equation.

On the way home, Leon began to think about asking Carol for a dog that he could train. He could train it to bite Jake’s dad. He could train it to bite the old lady on the next landing that kept looking at him and shaking her head. He could train it to bite Tina’s boyfriend and the postman. Then when Jake got older they could get famous for training dogs. The best dog trainers in the world.



5

As soon as the summer holidays start, things get jangled up at home. Leon can go to bed whenever he wants and sometimes he can even go to sleep on the sofa because his mum doesn't notice. He can eat whatever he wants but if there's nothing in the fridge and nothing in the cupboard it doesn't really count. He has to look after Jake nearly every day and Carol keeps crying and going to the phone box, leaving Leon in charge, and once when he picked Jake up, he wriggled so much that he fell on the carpet. He had stopped crying by the time Carol came back but it made Leon feel angry with her and he stole some more coins out of her purse. But he could have taken all the money because she doesn't know what's in there.

Early in the morning, just when it's getting light, Jake starts crying and Leon gets up with him. His nappy is always heavy and wet but as soon as Leon changes it, Jake starts smiling and laughing. Jake always wants the same thing for breakfast and now Leon has a good system. It took him a few weeks to get it just right but

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now he could tell anyone what to do to look after a baby in the mornings.

Change the nappy (remember to use the white cream or by the second morning the baby's bum is sore). Feed the baby but be careful going downstairs because babies move around in your arms and sometimes they're heavy; if you haven't made the breakfast bottle quickly enough, the baby will start crying again. Put six scoops of baby milk powder in the bottle and fill it with warm water from the kettle. You better taste it to see if it's not too hot. Sometimes if the baby is really hungry, you have to mix in some extra powder and a spoon of sugar. The worst thing is when the baby is sick. That makes a lot of mess and it can take ages to tidy up.

Even Carol doesn't know about the best routine for Jake and sometimes she forgets about him when he's in the high chair and Leon has to take him out. She goes to bed all the time so Leon has to do everything. When he goes into her room, she's always hidden under the blankets with her tablets next to the bed, some in a white bottle and then pink ones that you have to press out of a silver card. He pressed one out once. It looked like a sweet but after he licked it he threw it down the toilet.

Then, other times, Carol goes out and leaves him to watch the telly. She puts Jake in the pushchair and takes him out for hours and when she comes back she's tired and Jake is crying. She leaves the pushchair in the hall and just goes upstairs, talking to herself. Leon has to unfasten Jake's straps and take his baby suit off and feed him and sometimes all the things he has to do make Leon so tired and angry.

It seems like Jake's been crying for days. If he doesn't stop, Leon will have to go and get some money from Tina. If Tina isn't in then he will have to go to the lady next door who doesn't like him. He's already looked in Carol's purse but there isn't enough to buy some food for Jake, some nappies for Jake and some sweets for himself. There's no money at all, just some receipts, an old photograph and an earring. Leon's tipped the whole purse upside down.

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