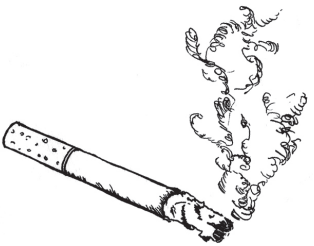

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2 April 1980

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.'

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