

MY NAME IS
LEON

KIT DE WAAL

Kit de Waal was born in Birmingham to an Irish mother and Caribbean father and worked for fifteen years in criminal and family law. She has been awarded the Bridport Flash Fiction Prize 2014, the SI Leeds Literary Reader's Choice Prize 2014, and second place in both the Costa Short Story Award 2014 and the Bath Short Story Award 2014. *My Name is Leon* is her first novel.

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For Bethany and Luke

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. Just over.’

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.’

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 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.

'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 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.

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.'

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. 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. Baby's 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 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 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.