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opening extract from

The Truth about Leo

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1
Planet Leo

They said Leo Rake was always in a world of his own, but he didn't care. After all, what did the real world know about him?

Leo had a trick he played on the real world. He just shut it out. It was like he had his own private mute button, like the one on the TV remote. And sometimes, when he put the world on mute, he'd have a running commentary in his head.

A lot went on in Leo's head. It was like having his own telly channel. Sometimes he'd be playing for England at Wembley, lobbing a goal over the German keeper. Other times he'd be talking to Mum, remembering how they chatted, wishing things were different.

When the other kids complained about their mums not letting them stay up late or stupid stuff like that, Leo would hear his mum and wish she hadn't had to die.

There was another good thing about the world

inside his head. He didn't have to lie. It was the only place he didn't have to lie. Especially about the things that had been going on.

He never let anybody in, though. Not Dad. Not Nan. Not even Flora, his friend. His only friend, if truth be known.

And certainly not the teachers, especially Manders. No way Manders!

Like now. Here he was in class again with Manders banging on. There he stood at the front, his mouth opening and closing like a stupid fish.

Leo watched Manders, like he was watching some boring politician on the news with the sound turned down.

Then he was back inside his head. He was back at Wemberlee. He could hear the crowd's roar.

And they were chanting his name:

'There's only one Leo Rake, one Leo Rake . . . There's only one L-E-O R-A-A-A-K-E . . .!'

Leo was making his debut against Germany. He was in the tunnel, marching out. Frank Lampard was in front of him and as they walked on to the pitch one of the German players – was it Michael Ballack? – reached over and smacked his shoulder and smiled.

'Hey, Rake. They send a boy to do a man's job in England now?' he bellowed, his German accent echoing in the tunnel.

'Better leave the kid alone,' a voice shouted over the noise of the crowd.

Leo felt another hand on his shoulder, looked round and saw a famous smile.

'Thanks, JT,' he whispered, catching a wink from John Terry as they neared the green of the Wembley pitch.

He felt JT's hand on his shoulder again. Firm. Purposeful.

'Do you know why he's getting at you?' the England captain whispered, looking up at the TV cameras in the tunnel, making sure he couldn't be heard. 'Because he knows how good you are.

'Every place you go on that pitch, I'm with you. We're all with you. Understand, son? Don't fear him; don't fear anybody. Out there – we look after each other. OK?'

JT was looking him firm in the eye. He winked again, then turned and walked to his captain's place at the front of the team. By the time the players reached the pitch the noise of the crowd was so loud Leo couldn't think.

In Leo's head, he heard the television commentator. 'And they are singing this young man's name. What a dream this is for the young Leo Rake . . . who today becomes the youngest Englishman to ever play for his country . . . a dream come true for the tragic young man whose mother passed away when he was

just eight years old. How proud would she be today, Andy . . .?'

'Well, Steve, I just couldn't find the words for that one, you know. She'd be very proud, I know that much. I know I am. I think the whole country is . . . The whole country will be with this boy today. What was it John Terry called him the other day?'

'JT said he could be the best player the country had ever produced, Andy, a hell of a compliment –'

Somebody *was* pushing his shoulder. But it wasn't JT.

It was Manders.

Leo thought about speaking. But reckoned he could stay in his own world just a few minutes longer.

He looked up at Manders, red rollneck jumper in need of a wash, yellowed teeth and big squashy lips that concertina'd when he talked. And worst of all his black beard streaked with grey, which covered his face, like he had something to hide.

Leo wondered why Manders never cut his beard, or at least trimmed it. It seemed to be allowed to roam free on his face, setting up camp wherever it liked.

He could see the old buffer was jabbering on. Talking rubbish, as usual.

But Leo wasn't listening. Wembley was heating up now. It was time for the national anthems . . . The Germans would be first. He heard the music in his head.

'Duur-dur-dur-duur, dur-dur-dur, duh-*duh* . . .'

Leo tried to hold on to Wembley but the signal was fading. The real world was pulling him back. He was back in the classroom now, with its smells of mouldy trainers and boredom.

He knew they were all laughing at him. Laughing at Manders's skit, which he could tell was all about him. He felt the class's laughter vibrate around him; he knew its rhythm all too well.

Manders towered above him. Once or twice he glanced down at Leo but mostly he was talking to the class, his arms gesticulating wildly.

He was playing to the gallery as usual, enjoying the appreciation of a captive audience. Leo was his straight man, the unwilling other half of a daily double act.

Still Leo didn't listen. He wouldn't. He refused to let them in.

How he hated Manders, he thought, how he hated the lot of them.

He noticed how many whiskers from his rotten beard were stuck on the top of Manders's red scruffy jumper.

As he watched, he saw another detach itself from his beard and cartwheel down his chest before getting caught. He noticed it was black but turned to white at one end, like a badger's.

It was then the sound burst in on him. He couldn't

keep the real world out forever, no matter how hard he tried. Eventually the noise of the world always came rushing in, like when he came up for air in a swimming pool.

'Is there anybody in there?' Manders demanded, pointing at Leo, his head turned away towards his audience.

'Earth to Leo, Earth to Leo: is there anybody there?'

The laughter was stronger now. It had spread, even, to the timid kids, the ones who only laughed when everybody laughed.

Leo tried to let it wash over him, like the breakwaters on Easthampton beach let the waves wash over them.

But Manders's ranting brought him back to reality.

'Is it nice in there?' he was saying, his face pushed close to Leo's. 'Is it nice in there on Planet Leo?'

Leo looked at Manders.

You don't understand me, he thought.

You think you do, but you don't.

Leo felt tired. He always felt tired. If he'd ever woken up brimming with energy, he couldn't remember how it felt.

If only you knew, he thought, looking up at Manders's leering face.

You'd know why I'm late for school, why my homework's never done.

You'd know why I always have the wrong sports kit and why it's never washed.

Then you'd understand, he thought.

Maybe then you'd leave me alone.

But Manders didn't know. Nobody knew. Leo couldn't tell. Not now. Not ever.

Manders wasn't finished.

'Since Mr Rake refuses to speak to us,' he was saying, 'since he prefers to remain on Planet Leo, I guess we will have to think of some special punishment for the inevitable fact that he has obviously left his homework at home again. Until he finds his tongue.'

The laughter was reaching fever pitch.

'You will recall that it was Mr Rake here whose job it was to write up neatly and then post our letter to the Prime Minister. Have you done it, boy?'

Leo muttered his reply, hoping nobody else in class would hear.

'Yes . . . No . . . Sort of, Sir, I . . . er . . .'

But everybody had heard. The class was quiet now, waiting, listening for the next instalment.

'Well, that is a first, even for you, Rake,' Manders boomed. 'The answer to the simple question: "Did you post the letter?" seems to be *yes* and *no*, not to mention *sort of* . . .'

Manders was addressing the class again, warming to his task.

'All you had to do, Rake, was pop it in the post

box. I seem to recall it was a very good letter too.'

A huge hoot of laughter greeted this remark. The back row of the class convulsed. Leo turned to look at them. They were always the ones that laughed the loudest. The trouble-makers. Mary Chesterton and that girl Kerry, who followed her around like a puppy.

Then there was another voice, a kinder voice, cutting through the laughter.

'Why don't you all just shut up!' the voice was saying. 'It's not as if any of you ever have an idea as good as Leo's.'

It was Flora, sat at the next desk.

When she spoke, the class hushed for a fraction of time, but Leo knew the way it worked.

'Oo – er. It's the weirdo's little girlfriend!'

How he hated Mary Chesterton. Then she and the Kerry girl began to chant.

'Now–we–know–your–*boy*–friend!'

Leo stole a glance at Flora. She was smiling at him. That was why he liked her. She could always cheer him up. She seemed to understand.

So what if she was a girl. He didn't care.

He could tell her anything. Well, not quite anything. Not yet. And, anyway, she'd only been at Pier Road a term.

Leo liked the way her hair was always spiked up, even though she didn't seem to ever comb it. It was cut short and blonde.

She was looking up at Manders, no longer smiling: her pale blue eyes were stern. She was trying to make a point.

Manders positioned himself between their two desks.

He was trying to be serious, trying to calm the disorder he had caused himself.

His arms were folded. His lips were pursed.

He's thinking of what to say next, Leo thought. He's trying to work out how to shut the class up.

Leo watched Manders stretch his body up, arching his back, trying to be as tall as he could. Pulling rank on a bunch of kids.

'Thank you, Flora Long, for your contribution to the proceedings,' Manders mocked, leaning down towards her.

'It was all Leo's idea, Sir. That's all I'm saying. I mean it was his idea to write to the Prime Minister in the first place. To ask him to open the school library, Sir. Because you used to teach him here, Sir. Like you said. In this very class.'

Leo watched Flora. Saw how she was winding Manders round her little finger. Praising him. Flattering him. Making him feel important.

He was stuffed up even more now, like a robin on a Boxing Day bird-table, packed with pickings.

'Well, I did use to teach Mr Green. Yes, he was a pupil of mine . . .' Manders said, for some reason

speaking all posh and high and mighty. 'Or Barnaby, as of course I knew him way before he became Prime Minister . . .'

Manders was laughing to himself as if he'd told the funniest joke in the world, his shoulders moving up and down.

'I mean, Sir, it's supposed to be a joint letter, isn't it?' Flora carried on, Manders putty in her hands. 'From us all to him. It's a joint letter from our class to him . . . so we can just write it again, can't we?'

Flora's hands were inside her school bag, searching for something.

'I've got the beginnings of it here. I wrote a lot of it down,' she went on, finding a notebook and fishing it out.

Manders stood bemused, seemingly unable to stop her.

Quickly she opened the book up and began reading.

'Dear Prime Minister. We are pupils in Class 5M at Pier Road Primary School and our teacher, Mr Manders, has told us that you used to be a pupil at our school . . .'

Manders had begun to calm down and, at the mention of his name, calmed further, mollified.

'Carry on,' he said matter-of-factly, turning to walk back towards the board.

Flora grinned at Leo, triumphant.

'We know that Mr Manders was your favourite teacher when you were here –'

Manders was wagging his finger. 'Oh, I don't think we need to put that . . .'

He paused.

'Always be modest, children. Remember that.'

When he turned back to the board Leo and Flora exchanged glances, their eyebrows raised.

'Modest. *Manders!*' Flora mouthed, her hands held up beside her head, pretending it was giant-sized.

'Carry on, Miss Long,' the teacher growled, his back still turned.

'. . . and that the school didn't have a proper library, just the bookshelves in the corridor. You will be pleased to know we are about to open a brand-new library and we are all very excited –'

Manders had turned and was interrupting.

'*Pleased*, Miss Long, I think we say *pleased*, not "excited". Don't you? This is a library, not a pop concert.'

'– pleased,' Flora continued, ignoring a fresh ripple of laughter from the class. 'We know that as Prime Minister you are very busy but we were wondering if you would like to come back to your old school to open the library officially . . .'

Flora folded up her letter, winking at Leo, laughter bubbling up inside her.

'That's as far as I got, Sir,' she smiled.

Manders ignored her and instead surveyed the class, his piggy little eyes finally resting on Leo once again.

'Right,' he barked, 'that's not a bad start. But we still have to deal with the letter-loser, don't we . . . Have you got anything to say for yourself, Rake?'

'Yes,' Leo whispered, looking up, knowing that this time he had to tell the truth.

After all, they might find out. If his stupid plan worked.

'I've kind of . . . I mean I've already sort of sent the letter, I mean I think I have . . .'

The laughter in the class stopped, suddenly. They wanted to hear this for themselves. This was too good to miss.

Even Flora was looking at Leo oddly. She didn't know the trick he'd tried.

'Let's get this straight, shall we, Rake? You *think* you've "kind of" sent the letter, but you're not sure . . .' Manders said, pronouncing his words slowly for maximum effect. 'Even by your pathetic standards that's one for the record books. It really is.'

Manders arrived back in front of Leo's desk, leering at him, his tongue stuck out to the side, a snapshot of a stupid person's studied concentration.

Leo realized something then. He realized that this was what Manders enjoyed best, humiliating him.

Worse still – this was probably what he *did* best. It was Manders that was pathetic, not him.

But knowing all that wasn't going to help him, because Manders was the teacher and he was the kid. He was just going to have to put up with it.

Manders rounded on him again.

'Would you care to clarify, Rake? In words of one syllable. Have you sent this letter or not? I think we're all a tad confused.'

Flora was looking at him as confused as the rest of them and he knew why. She'd tried to save him and then he'd messed things up. He had to explain.

When Leo spoke, it was in a whisper.

'I did send it, Sir. I emailed it. Last night.'

The class began to laugh again, but Manders silenced them with a wave of his arm.

'You *emailed* the Prime Minister, did you, Rake?' he said, incredulous. 'What address did you send it to, boy wonder – pm@planetleo.com?'

Leo opened his mouth to reply but decided there was no point. He *had* emailed it. That was true. He'd done it from his own email address too. The one Dad had let him set up on the surgery computer.

But he'd guessed the Prime Minister's email address from the official website. It was just a stab in the dark, really. He knew it wouldn't get through.

So Manders was right. He was an idiot. He was a total failure. Maybe they were *all* right.

Manders had turned to address the class again.

'OK, all of you. We will ignore this boy and carry on as follows. You all heard Flora Long. I'm sure you took notes. By tomorrow I want you all to have your versions of the letter to the Prime Minister and tomorrow we will pick the best one.'

He paused, eyeing Flora.

'We will *post* that one to 10 Downing Street, which – as the brighter sparks among you may know – is the official residence of Mr Barnaby Green, who now runs the country and used to – heaven help him – sit in one of these very seats in this very classroom.'

When Manders paused for a second time, Leo knew he was thinking of a way to have another go at him. Leo could tell. It was the way the teacher's gaze had gone from Leo to Flora and back again; it was like there was unfinished business.

'Although, looking at *some* people in this class, I doubt history is going to repeat itself any time soon.'

Manders now stood in front of the two of them.

'What do you think, Rake? Do you think you stand much chance of making anything of your life at the rate you're going? Maybe you'll even get to school on time tomorrow. Maybe a miracle will befall us. Why *are* you late for school every day, Rake? Maybe I should have a word with your mum . . .'

Now Leo was angry. Really angry. The kind of anger that feels like something molten inside you,

the kind that needs letting out. But he didn't let it out. Instead he sat paralysed, his heart beating harder and harder.

Then he heard Flora.

She spoke quietly, her pale cheeks suddenly a rosy pink.

'Don't you know, Mr Manders? Leo hasn't got a mum. She died two years ago. It was before I was here, Sir, but surely *you* remember it?'

Manders froze, his sneer contorted, his eyes suddenly panicky.

In an instant, though, he seemed to regain his composure.

The class was still and silent, as if under a spell. Leo could see they were all as appalled by Manders as he was – but they were fascinated too. They wanted to see how far he would go. For a moment Leo thought the silence would never end.

'I think we had better separate you two,' Manders said in a calm voice, trying to pretend nothing had happened. 'Flora will sit at the front of class. Change over to the desk next to Richards. *Now!*'

Flora didn't protest.

She slid her chair back, its scraping the only sound in class. Slowly she walked to the front, her shoes clip-clipping, then the scraping of the chair.

The bell rang and suddenly the spell was broken.

The crescendo of chairs being pushed back and the eruption of chattering signalling the end of a day.

It was home time.

But Leo never really wanted to go home. Not that anybody knew. He'd kept that secret well. The biggest secret of all.

Instead Leo was back in Leo's World. It was the second half of the Germany game.

'We're into the last ten minutes here at Wembley in the vital World Cup qualifier,' the commentator gushed. 'And England are on the attack. Rooney with a fabulous ball to Joe Cole and now – oh, and here comes the schoolboy, Rake . . . he's broken through the Germans' defence, he takes one touch, two touches . . . three touches, he shoots . . . **G-O-A-L!** RAKE SCORES FOR ENGLAND!'