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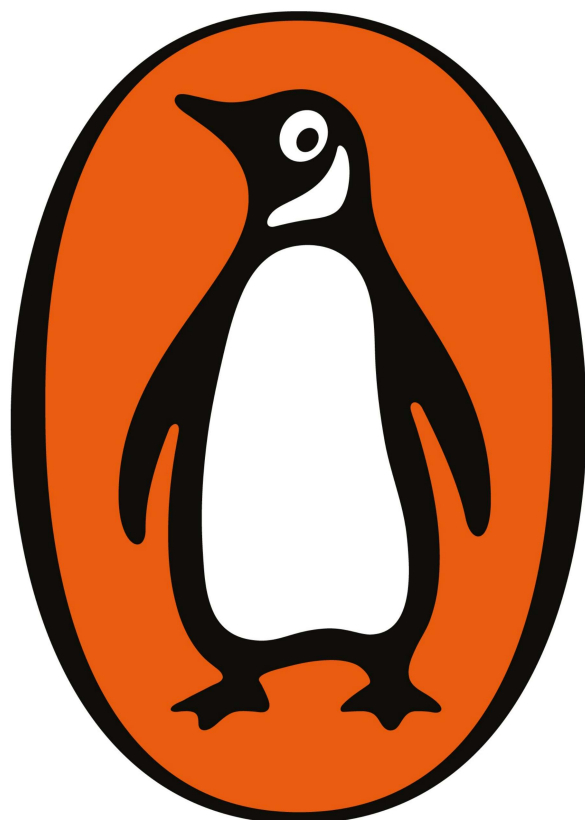
THE
READING
AGENCY

Sometimes the people we
meet change our lives forever

SIX
FOOT
SIX

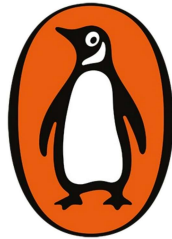


KIT DE WAAL



Kit de Waal

SIX FOOT SIX



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PENGUIN BOOKS

SIX FOOT SIX

Kit de Waal was born in Birmingham to an Irish mother, who was a foster carer, and a Caribbean father. She worked for fifteen years in criminal and family law. She was a magistrate for several years and she sits on adoption panels. Her first novel, *My Name is Leon*, is an international bestseller. It was shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Award and the Desmond Elliott Prize. It was the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year 2017. Kit de Waal has two children.

To Bethany and Luke



CHAPTER ONE

Timothy Flowers stands at the corner of Gas Street and Yew Tree Lane. It's the third of November and it's Friday and it's fifteen minutes past eleven o'clock in the morning. In a few minutes, Timothy will see the number forty-five bus. It will be the new Enviro 400 City Bus with the back-to-front design. It's electric. You can get the internet on the new Enviro 400.

Timothy has seen the new bus before. Once. It was so quiet that he didn't even know it was coming and he wasn't ready for it. It went past before Timothy could have a proper look, so this time he is waiting at the bottom of the hill. It's an exciting day for two reasons. First of all, it's Timothy's birthday. His mum said he was nearly born the next day so, just before midnight, Timothy will be twenty-one years old. Secondly, he will see the new Enviro 400 City Bus and there are only fourteen of them in the whole of the city.

'Oi, mate!'

Timothy turns and sees a man in the front yard of the first house nearest the corner. The house isn't like Timothy's house. Timothy's house has double glazing that keeps out all the noise from the street so Timothy can sleep at night. Timothy's mum says that sometimes, when his brain hasn't had enough rest, Timothy gets confused, so she makes sure he goes to bed by nine o'clock. Then she checks on him after *News at Ten*. But the house at the corner has windows missing at the top and the bottom. The windows at the side are made of pretty coloured glass in green and yellow and red. The house used to be all boarded up, but someone is making it nice again. It's old and tall with a big basement. The basement has a small front yard below street level which is very dirty and untidy. It's as untidy as the man who is standing in it without a shirt on shouting 'Oi, mate!' all the time.

The man must be freezing. He has dirt on his naked chest and stripes of muck on his cheeks like war paint. He has black hair that is oily and curly and one big blob of black dirt under his nose that looks like a moustache. If he was in a film, he would be Charlie Chaplin. Charlie Chaplin films are the best because they're funny and sad at the same time. But Timothy's mum says silent films are the best because they give her peace and quiet.

As well as shouting, the man is pointing at Timothy and waving. 'Yes, you!' he says. 'You! The longfella! Here, down here!'

If there's one thing that Timothy has been told over and over again, it's never ever talk to strangers. So Timothy turns away to look up the road in

case the bus is coming.

‘Oi, kid!’ shouts the man again. ‘Here, Longfella, listen! Come here!’

The man is smiling and beckoning Timothy over with his hand. ‘Come here a minute! Stand a bit closer so I don’t have to shout.’

Timothy walks to the edge of the sunken yard and leans over the wall so he can see all of the man instead of just his top half. The man has proper muscles on his chest and arms, and a chain with a cross on it round his neck.

‘Listen, I’m in need of a favour,’ he says. Even though it’s really cold, the man is sweating and he wipes his forehead with the back of his hand.

‘You talk funny,’ says Timothy.

‘Well, I can’t help that,’ says the man. ‘I’m from Dublin. You’re a local lad, are you, from around here?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you’re off somewhere? Only you’ve been at that corner for ten minutes. What are you waiting for? And don’t say a bus because there’s no bus stop as far as I can see.’

‘The bus stop is at the next corner,’ says Timothy and points up the road. ‘You go up the hill, and then at the top you’ll see Grove Road and the bus stop is by the Pound Shop. It’s got a shelter and an electric sign that tells you the minutes you have to wait.’

‘No, listen,’ says the man. ‘I don’t want to know where the bus stop is, no. Listen, what I’m asking is this. Are you doing anything right now? I mean, if you’re just standing around, I’ve got a proposition for you.’

‘Proposition?’

‘Hold on there now, Longfella,’ says the man, ‘I’m putting a right strain on my neck looking up at you.’

The man climbs back into the basement window and comes straight out again with a very white shirt and a dirty towel. He climbs up the ladder that leads from the basement yard to the street, hops over the wall and stands in front of Timothy.

‘Christ,’ he says. ‘I seen you walk up to that corner and I thought there’s the answer to my bloody prayers, right there. What are you, six foot six?’

Timothy looks down at the man. ‘I am six foot five plus seven-eighths of an inch, but that’s when I’ve got no shoes on. When I’m wearing these shoes,’ says Timothy, and he holds one foot up so the man can see the sole, ‘I am bigger than six foot six inches. I’m six foot six and a half. I’ve got a different pair of shoes at home, and when I wear them I’m only six foot six and a quarter. I’m twenty-one today. It’s my birthday. And my mum says people shouldn’t swear.’

All the time Timothy is speaking, the man is wiping his face and his chest with the dirty towel. ‘Your mam, eh? Right. Yes. Well, she’s right. No swearing. Where was I? All right, listen now. What are you doing today? I

mean right now. What are you doing standing at that corner? You look to me like a lad that's come out of the house because he's a bit bored. Because if you are, and you're not busy or doing anything else, you could help me out.'

'How?' says Timothy.

Even though he is still dirty, the man puts his very white shirt on and buttons it up. He has forgotten the black mark under his nose and Timothy points to it.

'You look like Charlie Chaplin, you do.'

'Funny you should say that,' says the man, tucking his shirt into his black trousers and tightening the belt, 'because that's what they call me. Charlie. I'm Colin really – Colin Charles Pearson – but Charlie stuck on account of the fact that Colin makes me sound like a right plank.' He holds his hand out for Timothy to shake, but all the time he is looking up and down.

'Christ,' he says, 'you're as big as a wardrobe and no mistake. What do I call you?'

'Timothy Flowers.'

'Blimey. Really? Flowers?'

'Timothy Joseph Flowers.'

'Okay, Flowers, it's like this.'

'Yes?'

'Here's my situation. I've been let down. I own that house there and I'm repairing it, you know, bringing it up to scratch. Big job. Very big job. Very important job. Time sensitive. It matters a lot. And I had a couple of blokes coming to take up the concrete in that basement and they've not turned up. They've let me down. I only came to open up, and instead I've been at it for three hours solid. Knackered, I am. Half past eight, I said. Half feckin' eight.'

Charlie's voice has been getting louder and louder. All of a sudden he looks up the road and down the road just in case the late blokes have decided to come after all. Then Charlie says something quickly that sounds like he's still swearing, but much quieter and maybe in Irish. Then he looks at Timothy and claps his hands.

'And so that's where you come in, Longfella, mate. Like I say, you could be the answer to my prayers or, at the very least, get me temporarily out of the bloody shite – sorry, I mean to say, the difficulties in which I find myself.'

'How?'

'Well,' says Charlie, pointing at Timothy's chest. 'You've got something I need, something I haven't got. I need either two normal-sized men, like me, or –' Charlie reaches up and slaps Timothy on his shoulder – 'one of you. See, you, lad, are, like I said, a wardrobe and a double wardrobe at that. Me, I'm more your IKEA bookcase.'

'Why do you need a wardrobe?'

‘No, I don’t.’ Charlie looks up at the sky and takes a very deep breath. Then he looks at his watch and shakes his head. ‘Time’s ticking on. How to put this? You’re like, say, Batman, big and strong, and I’m just Robin, smaller by a good nine inches. I’m Luke Skywalker and you are Chewbacca.’

Timothy shakes his head. ‘Chewbacca is seven foot six inches. It says so in my book.’

‘Yeah, but we’re not in a book now, are we? This is real life. This is you and me and we’ve got a job to do. This is where Luke Skywalker gets Chewie to join his gang.’

‘What gang?’

Charlie takes Timothy’s arm and leads him to the very edge of the wall and points to the open basement window.

‘See that set-up, there?’ says Charlie.

There are two minutes left before the Enviro 400 City Bus comes, so Timothy can afford to look at the set-up. The man points down to the front garden in the basement. There is a big window at the front of the house with no glass. Sticking out of the window, there is a chute made out of grey plastic a foot wide. The chute sits in a big blue bucket. The bucket is half full of soil, little stones and big rocks. A long wooden ladder splashed with paint leads from the front garden up to the pavement next to a massive yellow skip on the street.

Charlie keeps shaking his head like he doesn’t want to believe that the set-up is true. He takes so long pointing everything out that there is only one minute before the bus is due, and Timothy is beginning not to listen. So while Charlie is still talking, Timothy goes to the corner of Gas Street and Yew Tree Lane. The bus that comes isn’t the Enviro 400 City Bus. It’s a Plaxton Paramount DAF 3500, which everyone knows isn’t a rare bus at all. Timothy has been on so many Plaxtons he’s lost count. So Timothy walks back to Charlie, who has his arms folded like he’s Timothy’s mother.

‘Was that your bus?’

‘No, it was a different one.’

‘Listen, if you need a lift somewhere,’ Charlie says, ‘I can drop you there in my van later, but I could really do with a bit of help here, you know. I mean, do you realize what I’ve got to do? Look.’

Charlie points again at the set-up and explains it all to Timothy. ‘I’m breaking up a solid concrete floor. Me, on my own. I’m shovelling it on to the chute. Chute to bucket, chute to bucket, chute to bucket, till the bucket’s full. Climb out the friggin’ window. Haul the bucket across the yard and climb up them bloody steps with it. And I tell you what, Flowers, mate, that bucket gets heavier when you go against gravity. At the top of the ladder, same problem. I’ve got to heft the bucket up on to this bloody shoulder here – the one with the bruises – and empty it into that skip there. Then I’ve got to just turn round

and do the whole bloody thing again. And again. Like I said, three hours. And I'm double your age. Double. You following?'

Timothy does follow.

'And if it rains, and it would be just my bloody luck if it did, I'll have the mud to contend with on top of everything else. It's the devil's own game, I tell you. So what I'm thinking is this.' Charlie puts his arm up and tries to lay it round Timothy's shoulder but his arm won't reach so he pats him on the back. 'If you could give me a few hours, we could break the back of this bloody job. I'd work with you, both of us together. I'd fill the bucket and you'd empty it. Twice as fast. I could let you have a few quid for your time. You win. I win.'

'Is it a race?' asks Timothy.

'A race? No,' says Charlie, 'it's not a race. It's a basement flat conversion. We're racing against the clock, Longfella, and that's the worst opponent there is. The clock never gives up.'

'But you said we'd both be winners,' says Timothy.

'Oh yeah, yeah,' says Charlie, nodding. 'Yeah, well, if we fill the skip by the end of the day and get that bloody concrete up, I win with my blood pressure returning to normal, and you win twenty quid. How's that?'

'Twenty quid,' repeats Timothy. He knows what twenty pounds will buy, because one model bus is four pounds ninety-nine and he's good at maths. 'I have to tell my mum if strangers talk to me, or if anyone tries to get me to do things like last time.'

'Last time?'

'I got into trouble.'

Charlie points to the skip. 'Well, does that look like trouble?'

'No.'

'And do I look like a stranger to you, Longfella?'

Timothy can see the black of Charlie's eyes and the smudge of black under his nose that looks like a moustache. And he can see wrinkles around the man's eyes that Timothy's mum calls laughter lines.

'Not really,' says Timothy.

'Well, there you go! Look, you can tell your mam if you like. Of course you can, but if you do and she says you can't have your twenty quid, what then?'

'I won't be a winner.'

'Exactly.'

Timothy looks at the set-up again and the blue bucket of rocks. He doesn't know what his mother would say about him helping Charlie, but she did tell him to go for a long walk. She also knows he's saving up for some more model buses. And she always does the house from top to bottom on Friday

mornings before she goes to work and he gets in her way. That is why he's standing at the corner of Gas Street and Yew Tree Lane in the first place.

'All right,' says Timothy, and Charlie rubs his hands together as if he's gone cold all of a sudden.

'Saved the bloody day you have, Timothy Flowers. Hero, you are. Right, fag first, Longfella, then we can start.'