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**RICHARD
OSMAN**

The
MURDER
Club

VIKING

an imprint of

PENGUIN BOOKS

Joyce

Well, let's start with Elizabeth, shall we? And see where that gets us?

I knew who she was, of course; everybody here knows Elizabeth. She has one of the three-bed flats in Larkin Court. It's the one on the corner, with the decking? Also, I was once on a quiz team with Stephen, who, for a number of reasons, is Elizabeth's third husband.

I was at lunch, this is two or three months ago, and it must have been a Monday, because it was shepherd's pie. Elizabeth said she could see that I was eating, but wanted to ask me a question about knife wounds, if it wasn't inconvenient?

I said, 'Not at all, of course, please,' or words to that effect. I won't always remember everything exactly, I might as well tell you that now. So she opened a manila folder, and I saw some typed sheets and the edges of what looked like old photographs. Then she was straight into it.

Elizabeth asked me to imagine that a girl had been stabbed with a knife. I asked what sort of knife she had been stabbed with, and Elizabeth said probably just a normal kitchen knife. John Lewis. She didn't say that, but that was what I pictured. Then she asked me to imagine this girl had been stabbed, three or four times, just under the breastbone. In and out, in and out, very nasty, but without severing an artery. She was fairly quiet about the whole thing, because people were eating, and she does have some boundaries.

So there I was, imagining stab wounds, and Elizabeth asked me how long it would take the girl to bleed to death.

By the way, I realize I should have mentioned that I was a nurse for many years, otherwise none of this will make sense to you. Elizabeth would have known that from somewhere, because Elizabeth knows everything. Anyway, that's why she was asking me. You must have wondered what I was on about. I will get the hang of writing this, I promise.

I remember dabbing at my mouth before I answered, like you see on television sometimes. It makes you look cleverer, try it. I asked what the girl had weighed.

Elizabeth found the information in her folder, followed her finger and read out that the girl had been forty-six kilos. Which threw us both, because neither of us was sure what forty-six kilos was in real money. In my head I was thinking it must be about twenty-three stone? Two to one was my thinking. Even as I thought that, though, I suspected I was getting mixed up with inches and centimetres.

Elizabeth let me know the girl definitely wasn't twenty-three stone, as she had a picture of her corpse in the folder. She tapped the folder at me, before turning her attention back to the room, and said, 'Will somebody ask Bernard what forty-six kilos is?'

Bernard always sits by himself, on one of the smaller tables nearest the patio. It is Table 8. You don't need to know that, but I will tell you a bit about Bernard.

Bernard Cottle was very kind to me when I first arrived at Coopers Chase. He brought me a clematis cutting and explained the recycling timetable. They have four different coloured bins here. Four! Thanks to Bernard, I know that green is for glass, and blue is cardboard and paper. As for red and black, though, your guess is still as good as mine. I've seen all sorts as I've wandered about. Someone once put a fax machine in one.

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Bernard had been a professor, something in science, and had worked all around the world, including going to Dubai before anyone had heard of it. True to form, he was wearing a suit and tie to lunch, but was, nevertheless, reading the *Daily Express*. Mary from Ruskin Court, who was at the next table, got his attention and asked how much forty-six kilos was when it was at home.

Bernard nodded and called over to Elizabeth, 'Seven stone three and a bit.'

And that's Bernard for you.

Elizabeth thanked him and said that sounded about right, and Bernard returned to his crossword. I looked up centimetres and inches afterwards, and at least I was right about that.

Elizabeth went back to her question. How long would the girl stabbed with the kitchen knife have to live? I guessed that, unattended, she would probably die in around forty-five minutes.

'Well, quite, Joyce,' she said, and then had another question. What if the girl had had medical assistance? Not a doctor, but someone who could patch up a wound. Someone who'd been in the army, perhaps. Someone like that.

I have seen a lot of stab wounds in my time. My job wasn't all sprained ankles. So I said then, well, she wouldn't die at all. Which she wouldn't. It wouldn't have been fun for her, but it would have been easy to patch up.

Elizabeth was nodding away, and said that was precisely what she had told Ibrahim, although I didn't know Ibrahim at that time. As I say, this was a couple of months ago.

It hadn't seemed at all right to Elizabeth, and her view was that the boyfriend had killed her. I know this is still often the case. You read about it.

I think before I moved in I might have found this whole conversation unusual, but it is pretty par for the course once

you get to know everyone here. Last week I met the man who invented Mint Choc Chip ice cream, or so he tells it. I don't really have any way of checking.

I was glad to have helped Elizabeth in my small way, so decided I might ask a favour. I asked if there was any way I could take a look at the picture of the corpse. Just out of professional interest.

Elizabeth beamed, the way people around here beam when you ask to look at pictures of their grandchildren graduating. She slipped an A4 photocopy out of her folder, laid it, face down, in front of me and told me to keep it, as they all had copies.

I told her that was very kind of her, and she said not at all, but she wondered if she could ask me one final question.

'Of course,' I said.

Then she said, 'Are you ever free on Thursdays?'

And, that, believe it or not, was the first I had heard of Thursdays.

PC Donna De Freitas would like to have a gun. She would like to be chasing serial killers into abandoned warehouses, grimly getting the job done, despite a fresh bullet wound in her shoulder. Perhaps developing a taste for whisky and having an affair with her partner.

But for now, twenty-six years old, and sitting down for lunch at 11.45 in the morning, with four pensioners she has only just met, Donna understands that she will have to work her way up to all that. And besides, she has to admit that the last hour or so has been rather fun.

Donna has given her talk 'Practical Tips for Home Security' many times. And today there was the usual audience of older people, blankets across knees, free biscuits, and a few happy snoozers at the back. She gives the same advice each time. The absolute, paramount importance of installing window locks, checking ID cards and never giving out personal information to cold callers. More than anything, she is supposed to be a reassuring presence in a terrifying world. Donna understands that, and it also gets her out of both the station and paperwork, so she volunteers. Fairhaven Police Station is sleepier than Donna is used to.

Today, however, she had found herself at Coopers Chase Retirement Village. It seemed innocuous enough. Lush, untroubled, sedate, and on her drive in she had spotted a nice pub for lunch on the way home. So getting serial killers in headlocks on speedboats would have to wait.

'Security,' Donna had begun, though she was really

thinking about whether she should get a tattoo. A dolphin on her lower back? Or would that be too much of a cliché? And would it be painful? Probably, but she was supposed to be a police officer, wasn't she? 'What do we mean when we say the word "security"?' Well, I think that word means different things to different . . .'

A hand shot up in the front row. Which was not normally how this went, but in for a penny. An immaculately dressed woman in her eighties had a point to make.

'Dear, I think we're all hoping this won't be a talk about window locks.' The woman looked around her, picking up murmured support.

A gentleman hemmed in by a walking frame in the second row was next. 'And no ID cards please, we know about ID cards. Are you really from the Gas Board, or are you a burglar? We've got it, I promise.'

A free-for-all had commenced.

'It's not the Gas Board any more. It's Centrica,' said a man in a very good three-piece suit.

The man sitting next to him, wearing shorts, flip-flops and a West Ham United shirt, took this opportunity to stand up and stab a finger in no particular direction, 'It's thanks to Thatcher that, Ibrahim. We used to own it.'

'Oh do sit down, Ron,' the smartly dressed woman had said. Then looked at Donna and added, 'Sorry about Ron,' with a slow shake of her head. The comments had continued to fly.

'And what criminal wouldn't be able to forge an ID document?'

'I've got cataracts. You could show me a library card and I'd let you in.'

'They don't even check the meter now. It's all on the web.'

'It's on the cloud, dear.'

‘I’d welcome a burglar. It would be nice to have a visitor.’ There had been the briefest of lulls. An atonal symphony of whistles began as some hearing aids were turned up, while others were switched off. The woman in the front row had taken charge again.

‘So . . . and I’m Elizabeth, by the way . . . no window locks, please, and no ID cards, and no need to tell us we mustn’t give our PIN number to Nigerians over the phone. If I am still allowed to say Nigerians.’

Donna De Freitas had regrouped, but was aware she was no longer thinking about pub lunches or tattoos – now she was thinking about a riot training course back in the good, old days in south London.

‘Well, what shall we talk about then?’ Donna had asked. ‘I have to do at least forty-five minutes or I don’t get the time off in lieu.’

‘Institutional sexism in the police force?’ said Elizabeth.

‘I’d like to talk about the illegal shooting of Mark Duggan, sanctioned by the state and –’

‘Sit down, Ron!’

So it went on, enjoyably and agreeably, until the hour was up, whereupon Donna had been warmly thanked, shown pictures of grandchildren and then invited to stay for lunch.

And so here she is, picking at her salad, in what the menu describes as a ‘contemporary upscale restaurant’. A quarter to twelve is a little early for her to have lunch, but it wouldn’t have been polite to refuse the invitation. She notes that her four hosts are not only tucking in to full lunches, but have also cracked open a bottle of red wine.

‘That really was wonderful, Donna’, says Elizabeth. ‘We enjoyed it tremendously.’ Elizabeth looks to Donna like the sort of teacher who terrifies you all year but then gets you a grade A and cries when you leave. Perhaps it’s the tweed jacket.

‘It was blinding, Donna,’ says Ron. ‘Can I call you Donna, love?’

‘You can call me Donna, but maybe don’t call me love,’ says Donna.

‘Quite right, darling,’ agrees Ron. ‘Noted. That story about the Ukrainian with the parking ticket and the chainsaw, though? You should do after-dinner speaking, there’s money in it. I know someone, if you’d like a number?’

The salad is delicious, thinks Donna, and it’s not often she thinks that.

‘I would have made a terrific heroin smuggler, I think.’ This was Ibrahim, who had earlier raised the point about Centrica. ‘It’s just logistics, isn’t it? There’s all the weighing too, which I would enjoy, very precise. And they have machines to count money. All the mod cons. Have you ever captured a heroin dealer, PC De Freitas?’

‘No,’ admits Donna. ‘It’s on my list, though.’

‘But I’m right that they have machines to count money?’ asks Ibrahim.

‘They do, yes,’ says Donna.

‘Wonderful,’ says Ibrahim, and downs his glass of wine.

‘We bore easily,’ adds Elizabeth, also polishing off a glass. ‘God save us from window locks, WPC De Freitas.’

‘It’s just PC now,’ says Donna.

‘I see,’ says Elizabeth, lips pursing. ‘And what happens if I still choose to say WPC? Will there be a warrant for my arrest?’

‘No, but I’ll think a bit less of you,’ says Donna. ‘Because it’s a really simple thing to do, and it’s more respectful to me.’

‘Damn! Checkmate. OK,’ says Elizabeth, and unpurses her lips.

‘Thank you,’ says Donna.

‘Guess how old I am?’ challenges Ibrahim.

Donna hesitates. Ibrahim has a nice suit, and he has great

skin. He smells wonderful. A handkerchief is artfully folded in his breast pocket. Hair thinning, but still there. No paunch, and just the one chin. And yet underneath it all? Hmmm. Donna looks at Ibrahim's hands. Always the giveaway.

'Eighty?' she ventures.

She sees the wind depart Ibrahim's sails. 'Yes, spot on, but I look younger. I look about seventy-four. Everyone agrees. The secret is Pilates.'

'And what's your story, Joyce?' asks Donna to the fourth member of the group, a small, white-haired woman in a lavender blouse and mauve cardigan. She is sitting very happily, taking it all in. Mouth closed, but eyes bright. Like a quiet bird, constantly on the lookout for something sparkling in the sunshine.

'Me?' says Joyce. 'No story at all. I was a nurse, and then a mum, and then a nurse again. Nothing to see here I'm afraid.'

Elizabeth gives a short snort. 'Don't be taken in by Joyce, PC De Freitas. She is the type who "gets things done".'

'I'm just organized,' says Joyce. 'It's out of fashion. If I say I'm going to Zumba, I go to Zumba. That's just me. My daughter is the interesting one in the family. She runs a hedge fund, if you know what one is?'

'Not really,' admits Donna.

'No,' agrees Joyce.

'Zumba is before Pilates,' says Ibrahim. 'I don't like to do both. It's counter-intuitive to your major muscle groups.'

A question has been nagging at Donna throughout lunch. 'So, if you don't mind me asking, I know you all live at Coopers Chase, but how did the four of you become friends?'

'Friends?' Elizabeth seems amused. 'Oh, we're not friends, dear.'

Ron is chuckling. 'Christ, love, no, we're not friends. Do you need a top-up, Liz?'

Elizabeth nods and Ron pours. They are on a second bottle. It is 12.15.

Ibrahim agrees. 'I don't think friends is the word. We wouldn't choose to socialize, we have very different interests. I like Ron, I suppose, but he can be very difficult.'

Ron nods, 'I'm very difficult.'

'And Elizabeth's manner is off-putting.'

Elizabeth nods, 'There it is I'm afraid. I've always been an acquired taste. Since school.'

'I like Joyce, I suppose. I think we all like Joyce,' says Ibrahim.

Ron and Elizabeth nod their agreement again.

'Thank you, I'm sure,' says Joyce, chasing peas around her plate. 'Don't you think someone should invent flat peas?'

Donna tries to clear up her confusion.

'So if you aren't friends, then what are you?'

Donna sees Joyce look up and shake her head at the others, this unlikely gang. 'Well,' says Joyce. 'Firstly, we *are* friends, of course; this lot are just a little slow catching on. And secondly, if it didn't say on your invitation, PC De Freitas, then it was my oversight. We're the Thursday Murder Club.'

Elizabeth is going glassy-eyed with red wine, Ron is scratching at a 'West Ham' tattoo on his neck and Ibrahim is polishing an already-polished cufflink.

The restaurant is filling up around them, and Donna is not the first visitor to Coopers Chase to think this wouldn't be the worst place to live. She would kill for a glass of wine and an afternoon off.

'Also, I swim every day,' concludes Ibrahim. 'It keeps the skin tight.'

What *is* this place?