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We Chase Shadows

**RICHARD
OSMAN**



**PENGUIN
VIKING**

I heard dogs yesterday. If that ain't the police then what is?

Seriously, you got another explanation for hearing dogs? I'm all ears.

They found me somehow, the Met Police. Someone's told them I'm in Málaga. Must've.

Who's grassed me up then you think? Someone at the pub? The gym? Someone from the British Businessmen in Málaga Association Dinner Dance? I never should have bid at that charity auction. Two grand, and I didn't even want tickets to the Millennium Dome, I would've been arrested the second my plane landed at Heathrow.

'Connor Brooks, you're under arrest for this, that or the other.'
No, thanks. I've been to prison seven times, and seven's my limit. Prison's no fun when you're a bit older. There's always someone on all the machines in the prison gym. And you try getting up to go to the loo three times a night when you're sharing a cell with the Northampton Arsonist.

Some of the lads here wander around without a care in the world. They got new names, new faces, new teeth, but I never worried about all that. I sell dodgy vitamins in the post, I'm not exactly public enemy number one, am I? No one ever died from too much riboflavin.

There's lads round here, murderers some of them, riding round on mopeds, and where are the cops? Looking the other way.

The whole thing's a racket. Start to finish, a racket.

I'm going to be honest now. I just sent off for some wigs. So I can blend in? So I can go out and get a coffee and a paper. Good luck catching 'Baldy Brooks' when he's suddenly got hair like Rod Stewart!

Maybe it'd blow off on a moped though?

By the way, you might think I'm being paranoid, and I get it. I'm jumping at every little sound, I've stopped swimming in the pool and pruning the ornamental hedge. But it's not paranoia.

See, I've been warned.

Had a little tip-off from a mate back home. Still got a few friends looking out for me. 'The cops know where you are, they know where your money is, they're coming for you.'

So that's that. Plan B into action.

Noises again, outside. People on the street talking. About me? Impossible to tell, but what else are they gonna be talking about? The price of oranges? Do me a favour, they're circling. They know it, I know it.

Eventually they'll storm the house. Run in, screaming in Spanish, some bloke in a suit from the Met tagging along, nodding, going, 'Yeah, that's him, that's Baldy, stick the cuffs on.'

But I won't be here when they do.

I hate the nickname by the way, 'Baldy Brooks', but what else are they gonna call me? When I moved out here, I tried to get them to call me 'The Guv'nor' but no dice, there were three 'The Guv'nors' in Málaga already. One of them died when his yacht caught fire, but then another one showed up a month later. So 'Baldy' it is.

It's been nice, Málaga, it really has. Lots of good lads down here, lots of pals from home. Couple of armed robbers from Bermondsey, a few drug dealers – real drugs that is, not the vitamins

and woo-woo nonsense I sell. The local corner shop is run by a murderer from Cardiff, and he always makes sure to stock Marmite and cornflakes and PG Tips. It's a real community like that, and I'll miss it.

I have to disappear though, and this time I have to disappear completely. I can't be looking over my shoulder forever.

I'm a bright enough lad, and I've got a little plan. If I'm quick, I think it'll work. There's a few people I still trust, and they're helping.

I've written the note already: 'I can't take it . . . life of crime not for me . . . sins have caught up with me, blah blah blah.' Lay it on nice and thick. Leave it where the housekeeper can find it.

I've got a backpack full of ready cash, new passport, new name, all that. Again, easy if you've got friends. Leave some clothes on the beach, whatever. Let them search for the body. How you gonna find it when it's not there? They'll give up looking eventually. No one cares where I am except the police.

Where will I go? Well, wouldn't you like to know? But I'm going to stay in the business, you can work from anywhere these days.

I'll make you two promises though.

One, I'm going to find somewhere where no one else already has the nickname 'The Guv'nor'.

And two, I'm going to find out exactly who's grassed on me. And then I'm going to kill him.

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PART ONE

Never Go to London

It is lunchtime in The Brass Monkey, which is now Axley's second most profitable pub, since the pub opposite, The Flagon, started selling vapes to teenagers.

'I'm off to Rosie's book launch this evening,' says Steve.

A few nods at this from his regular lunch companions, but no one's very excited. Steve decides to ramp the story up a notch.

'It's in London.'

That does the trick. There are rueful shakes of the head all round.

'London,' says Jyoti Das. 'Rather you than me.'

'You taking the train, Steve?' asks Tony Taylor, blowing on a piece of microwaved scampi. 'Or driving?'

More intakes of breath at the idea of driving to London.

'Good luck driving,' says John Todd, in one hand a forkful of shepherd's pie, in the other a Sudoku, which appears to be eluding him. 'Don't know where you think you're going to park in London.'

John puts down his Sudoku and takes a sip of his pint, like a man who has seen too much in this life.

'Yeah, I'll get the train,' says Steve.

'Last train back is 11.30,' says Tony. 'Don't miss

it. I read a guy missed the last train back and was murdered.'

Wise nods all round.

'And that's London for you,' says John.

'We're staying over,' says Steve.

'Staying over?' says Jyoti.

'In London?' says John. 'Staying over in London? All right, Bill Gates.'

'Rosie's going on *Graham Norton*,' says Steve. 'The chat show. She invited me and Amy. They put you up in a hotel.'

'For free?' Tony asks. He drops his latest piece of scampi into his pint, then fishes it out and eats it.

'Hope so,' says Steve. 'You'd think so.'

'You'd better check,' says John. 'Five hundred quid sometimes in London. Six hundred, I heard once, and you have to tip. No, thank you. What happens at a book launch?'

Steve shrugs. 'There's booze, I know that.'

'Okay,' says Jyoti. 'That's something at least.'

The others nod and chew.

'Free?' asks John. 'The booze?'

'Think so,' says Steve.

'You'd better check that too,' says Jyoti. 'Don't want to be carrying money around in London. I read on Facebook one woman –'

Steve holds up a hand. 'You're all aware I was a police officer in London for twenty-five years?'

'It's changed,' says John. 'It's sped up.'

'London never changes,' says Steve. 'It stays the same speed, it's just that we've slowed down.'

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‘There’s something in that, Steve,’ says Jyoti. ‘But the woman on Facebook was very sure, and she had a brother-in-law who used to work there.’

The subject of London has been exhausted it seems. And, given that they’ve already covered which celebrities the new woman at the village shop looks a bit like, and what their tactics would be were they to appear on *The Traitors*, they need a new topic of conversation.

‘Felicity working out for you?’ asks Tony.

Steve smiles. For the first time in living memory, Tony Taylor has a girlfriend: Felicity Woollaston, one-time theatrical agent, then, briefly, an unwitting money launderer, which is how she came on Steve’s radar, and now office manager at We Solve Murders.

‘Good as gold,’ says Steve. ‘She enjoying it?’

‘Loves it,’ says Tony. ‘You got a lot on? Felicity never likes to say. Confidentiality.’

‘Bits and bobs,’ says Steve. ‘Murders are a bit like selling Rolls-Royces. You don’t have to solve many of them to make a living.’

It’s a white lie, We Solve Murders has solved no murders. Which is like Kentucky Fried Chicken selling no chicken. Not even a nugget.

It’s not that they’ve investigated murders and failed to solve them. It’s just that no one has given them a murder to solve yet.

Steve misses his old company, Steve Investigates. Lost dogs, cheating husbands, tax frauds. His own boss. But here we are, We Solve Murders. A three-way split: Steve, his daughter-in-law, Amy, and Rosie D’Antonio, the

world's bestselling novelist, 'if you don't count Freida McFadden', bankrolling the lot. Steve has, for a long time now – since Debbie died perhaps? – shied away from murders. So, in a way, it is lucky for him that in the six months We Solve Murders has been in business, he hasn't had a single one to solve. Steve wonders how long Rosie can keep funding the thing though. Yesterday Steve saw a LOST CAT sign on a lamppost and had cracked the case within the hour. So he's always got something to fall back on.

'Have you ever fixed a Rolls-Royce, Tony?' asks Jyoti.

Tony shakes his head. 'I fixed a Range Rover the other day. You need a lift to the station, Steve? There's the 2.44 from Brockenhurst, that'll get you into Waterloo for 4.20? The 3.44 stops at Basingstoke, so that would be 5.27. I don't know what time book launches start.'

Amy's the one missing her old life the most. She had a nice job. Close-protection officer. Dangerous, but good money. Danger is Amy's hobby, and if an unexplained corpse doesn't turn up soon, Steve knows that Amy will head back into her old world. Then Steve, in turn, will have to go back to worrying about her every day when he wakes up, and every night when he goes to sleep.

More than that though, he'll miss seeing her every day.

Steve is keenly aware that Amy has not even had to punch anyone for six months now, and you can see that she's itching to.

'Who else is on *Graham Norton*?' John asks.

'A singer and a chef,' says Steve. 'And Denzel Washington.'

More nods, then some determined eating.

'A singer,' says John. 'That'll be good.'

'Give our love to Amy and Rosie,' says Tony.

'You'll be back for the quiz?' Jyoti asks.

'Of course I'll be back for the quiz,' says Steve. 'When do I ever miss the quiz?'

'When you had all those murders on a while back,' says John. 'You missed a week.'

'Yeah.' Steve has to concede the point. 'I won't let that happen again.'

Steve is unsure why he let Rosie talk him into founding We Solve Murders. Actually, he is sure. Rosie can talk anyone into anything. But surely she'll get bored soon?

Steve is aching to go back to the old days of lost dogs and errant husbands.

He just needs another month or so without any murders. Then things can get back to normal.

Normal. Is there any sweeter word in the English language?