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# Blue

A Memoir

Keeping the Peace and Falling to Pieces

Written by John Sutherland

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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# Blue

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**John Sutherland** is a father of three, who lives with his wife and children in south London. For the best part of twenty-five years, he has served as a Metropolitan Police officer. He won the Baton of Honour as the outstanding recruit in his training school intake and rose through the ranks to become a highly respected senior officer. Over the course of his career, in which he has been awarded several commendations, he has worked in seven different London boroughs, in a variety of different ranks and roles, and he has also been posted to Scotland Yard on three separate occasions. His most recent operational job was as the Borough Commander for Southwark. *Blue* is John's first book.

policecommander.wordpress.com  
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# Blue

A MEMOIR

KEEPING THE PEACE AND  
FALLING TO PIECES

John Sutherland



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*For Bear*

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‘Every contact leaves a trace’

**LOCARD’S PRINCIPLE**

# Introduction

*Late April 2013.*

Springtime in London, this remarkable, kaleidoscopic carousel of a city that is my home. This is where I've lived since I was a teenager, where my wife and I have chosen to raise a family – and where I've worked as a police officer for the last twenty years and more. Two working decades of the grandest of adventures, the finest of friendships and the deepest of sorrows.

Down the years, I've been posted all over London – seven different boroughs in a variety of roles and ranks, three separate stints at Scotland Yard, a mix of uniform and detective experience, north and south of the river – and my geography of the capital is defined as much by the scenes of incidents and crimes as it is by any more conventional set of landmarks or a map of the Underground. You could walk with me for miles and I

could point out the block of flats where the murder took place, the street corner where I was assaulted, the stretch of road where the fatal crash happened, the place where I was sitting when I heard the shots fired, the silent memorial where my colleague fell. These things stay with you.

But I love what I do. Each day of my working life, I have had the opportunity and the responsibility to make a difference – sometimes all the difference in the world. It is my duty and my joy.



I am six months into my time as Borough Commander at Southwark, given charge of one of the more complex and demanding parts of town. It's the best job I've ever had, and I've had some really, really good ones. I'm surrounded by a brilliant, passionate and committed team and I'm facing a professional challenge of a different order to any that I've encountered before. This is the real thing and all that I've seen and experienced and learned since the day I took the oath has been in preparation for now.

At least, that's how it had seemed to be.



I've been feeling unwell for a couple of months and I'm

getting steadily worse. I can't remember the last time I didn't feel shattered. Up to now, I've been putting the exhaustion down to the combination of a properly serious job, the delights and demands of a young family and the flat-out pace of London living. It's just how things are at this point in my life.

But that doesn't explain some of the other things I've begun to experience. I'm getting increasingly anxious and I don't know why. I've started waking in the middle of the night in a state of complete panic and I can't offer any reason to explain it. And I've started to feel desperately low: the seemingly unstoppable advance of the black dog of depression.

I have absolutely no clue what's happening to me and no idea how to respond. I am the climber who has lost his grip, now slipping and sliding towards the edge of the precipice. I am Canute facing a tide that will become a tsunami.

In the last decade, I've missed only five days' work through sickness. I take pride in my attendance record. Like a significant number of my colleagues, I just don't 'do' sick and I'm wary, suspicious even, of many of those who do. So I just keep going, defiantly trying to push forwards in the face of something that is, increasingly and unrelentingly, stronger than me. Like playing rugby in the front row of a losing scrum. I'm struggling to hold my

ground. That sense of duty, that overwhelming feeling of responsibility, a thousand officers and staff to lead, a community of tens of thousands to protect, any number of eye-watering operational challenges, guns and knives and drugs and homicidal maniacs, a family to provide for.

And it all just keeps coming.



Last Thursday of April. I walk into the control room on the ground floor of Southwark Police Station, to oversee the afternoon's operational briefing. The room is laid out like a lo-fi (and low-budget) version of the deck of the *Starship Enterprise*: banks of computer terminals, swivel chairs, flickering CCTV monitors, ringing phones and crackling radios – and a sense of unexpected possibilities.

One of the PCs looks up from his screen and chirps in my direction: 'Guv'nor, it looks like we've just had a murder ...'

From the tone and inflection of his voice, he might just as well have been reading the football scores. There are no more details at this stage, but that single sentence already feels like more than I can cope with.

I couldn't tell you how many murders I've dealt with down the years – how many dead bodies I've seen; how many traumatic cases I've come across. And I've always

been able to take things in my stride. It just goes with the territory. But now I'm stumbling. The thought of another life taken, another blood-soaked scene and another shattered family is just too much to bear. I make it through to the end of the meeting and back to my office up on the first floor. I break a habit and close the door. I don't think anyone noticed, but I'm only just holding it together.

I slump into a chair. Get a grip, man. The phone rings. It's the PC from the control room again: 'Good news, Boss – we haven't had a murder . . .' He pauses: 'But we have just had someone jump off one of the bridges into the Thames.'

I put the phone down, return to my seat and, for the first time in my working life, the thought occupies the whole of my mind: *I don't know if I can do this any more.*



## B.C. – Before Coppering

The truth is, I was never going to make it as a shoplifter.

I'm fourteen years old and I live in Basingstoke – a place known as 'Donut City' to local CB Radio users, on account of the absurd number of roundabouts in and around town. Actually, the roundabouts are one of the more exciting features of the local area. I live with my family – Mum, Dad and two younger sisters – on a quiet residential street in a housing development at the edge of town. It's a friendly enough place, but nothing ever happens here.

I have braces on my teeth, a terrible haircut and a pair of ears that seem to belong to a bigger head.

It's a clear summer day and I'm at the top end of the town centre, riding my mum's bike. It's a classic early eighties ladies' design: no top tube and a tasteful wicker basket attached to the front handlebars. It is, without question, the worst getaway vehicle of all time.

I've got a bit of previous for nicking stuff from shops:

mostly top-shelf magazines and assorted confectionery. I'm not quite sure how it started and even less sure how I haven't been caught. I'd have spotted me a mile off.

The truth is, I'm boring – homework always handed in on time, polite to a fault, not normally brave enough to step out of line. But it's become something of a habit, not least motivated by the desire to impress one of the older boys in the year above me at school. Today it's just me, though, and my target is the newsagents along from the town hall. I'm after a packet of scampi-flavoured fries – the sort Dad sometimes buys in the pub.

I lean Mum's bike up against the wall and venture through the shop door, attempting anonymity and looking guilty as hell. The shop assistant is looking the other way.

Grab and go. Back out onto the street.

I haven't even made it to my miserable set of wheels when I feel a firm adult hand on my right shoulder. I almost pass out with fright, quite possibly the closest I've ever been to soiling myself. The hand in question belongs to some interfering grown-up who is more vigilant than your average newsagent. He has witnessed my felony and marches me back into the shop.

I am a stammering, stuttering impression of myself, absolutely terrified. *I'm going to be arrested. I'm going to be expelled. I'm going to be sent to live in the garden shed.*

None of these things happens. In fact, the man behind the counter just looks at me with an air of weary resignation, takes the packet and gestures at me to leave.

I mumble an apology and promise never to do it again. I mean it.



In March 1970, I'm the first new addition to my family. I'm born to a grieving mother (her old man died, far too soon, while I was on the way) and an ailing father. Dad is a Church of England priest suffering with bipolar. A wonderful man with a hateful condition. And he's been battling it for years. Mum is a teacher and the long suffering other half of an enormously challenging relationship. In its way, Dad's mental illness has had as much of an impact on her as it has on him. And she's been battling it for years. Two good people stumbling their way through the deep valleys and steep climbs that life throws their way.

And then me.

Over the years, home will be a bittersweet thing: frequently confusing, occasionally violent, ultimately heartbreaking. Mum and Dad will love the best they can. But life hurts.



In 1972, my baby sister Annie is born. Three years later, we're on a family break, staying with folk who live on the South Coast. Our host is a doctor and, not to put too fine a point on it, he saves my sister's life. He notices that something's out of place with her right eye and tells Mum and Dad to get her checked out properly as soon as we get home. The advice is heeded, Annie is diagnosed with cancer of the retina and surgeons have no option but to remove the eye.

I find myself walking down long white corridors at Bart's Hospital in London, a five-year-old boy in a suddenly serious and grown-up world, trying to reassure his mum that everything is going to be all right. Hard to measure or understand the impact of those days on me – all attention, quite understandably, is on my little sister. Apparently, though, I'm learning that my part in life is to make sure everyone else is OK.

With Annie in hospital, we stay in an unfamiliar London flat with people who are strangers to me. While we're there, they get burgled and I watch, fascinated, as a forensics officer dusts for prints.

Annie survives and flourishes. I tumble along.



I don't know how they came to be there, but the police are

parked on the drive outside, paying a friendly visit to the vicarage. They're driving one of those specially equipped and modified motorway Range Rovers and, much to my delight, I get to clamber all over it. I watch, spellbound, as the flashing blue light on the roof spirals several feet into the air. A small seed is planted.



Later the same year, one sister becomes two. Her name is Mary. No life threatening illnesses this time, just a little bundle of apparently untroubled life. And our family is complete – aside from a succession of cats that get run over and dogs that don't.

It is a religious upbringing, lived in a collection of church settings where the certainty of what people stand against can seem much clearer than the knowledge of what they stand for. Most people will mean well most of the time, but that doesn't help. I am left in possession of a seemingly endless set of rules and haunted by a crippling sense of guilt – the inescapable feeling of never quite being good enough.



The happiest times of my earlier years are with my best friend, Titus. He lives in the village next door. He's born

ten days after me and we're thrown together from the very beginning. His dad was a Motor Torpedo Boat Commander during the Second World War and he re-enacts naval battles for us on the kitchen table, using cutlery and assorted condiment jars as the craft in his tales. He later did well in the City and they have a large and wonderful home.

Endless hours and days spent outdoors – climbing trees, making camps, racing go-karts, scrambling through woods and fields, inhabiting tales in which we are the heroes – coming in to raid the fridge, before setting out again. These are the things I remember more clearly.



In 1977, we move from village to town and I become the boy from Basingstoke. The place with all the roundabouts. When I'm not running around outside with footballs and friends, I lose myself in books, captivated by the alchemy of storytelling. Narnia stays longest in my memory, as a place of adventure and wonder, of dryads and fauns, giants and centaurs, of Aslan and the triumph of good over evil. I let my imagination run free.



For most of my childhood, I am completely oblivious to

Dad's illness – certainly at any conscious level. He was into amateur dramatics in his student days and he puts on enough of a show to leave me none the wiser. All I know is that he's my dad: the man who spends countless hours kicking footballs with me, the person who wrestles with me as I test my strength against his and the one who plays goodness knows how many rounds of my favourite Battle of Britain board game. When I pick up some horrible virus and begin to hallucinate all manner of fearful things, he reassures me and lets me share his bed. He's my hero. Which is exactly what a father should be to his son.

One afternoon, he borrows an old Fiat 500 from a friend and takes me out for a spin. We're still living in the sepia days before the interfering twins, Health and Safety, have ruined the potential for childhood tomfoolery and Dad is gloriously relaxed about these things. The car's canvas sunroof is pulled all the way back and I am allowed to stand, unrestrained, on the front passenger seat with my head poking out – a small papal imitation touring the roads that surround the town centre. We are spotted by the local Old Bill and get pulled over. Dad is given a ticking off, but they're friendly enough and leave it at that.



Every summer, we make a family pilgrimage to the