

The character strikes back

by Tom Palmer

This story has been written in five parts to act as a classroom read that teachers can read to children for five minutes every day during a single week. It is a twist on Tom Palmer's Foul Play books, which are published by Puffin. www.tompalmer.co.uk

Day One: The Man in Black

It started on a Monday morning. I was about to go and work at a school.

That's what I remember most: it was just another normal day.

Except it *wasn't* a normal day.

Not by a long way.

A *normal* day for me is either sitting down to write for three or four hours – or visiting a school to do a talk.

I'm an author. I write books for children. My books are usually about football. But there's more to them than that. Some of them are thrillers or crime stories. Others are about families and friends.

I have always thought that being an author was a good job. A *brilliant* job.

And it is. It makes me happy.

Normally.

So long as one of my characters doesn't come alive and decide to hunt me down.

But that's exactly what happened.

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The school visit that Monday was great. I talked, ran a quiz, held a penalty shoot out, then took questions.

It was during the question session that the day started to go a bit weird. I was talking to a hundred or so children who were sitting in an assembly, with half a dozen teachers and teaching assistants at the back. Four women and two men.

The questions that the children asked were great.

'Where do you get your ideas for *Foul Play* from?' was the first question, coming from a girl in the front row.

One of my series is called *Foul Play*. It's about a boy called Danny – and his friend, Charlotte – and how they try to solve football crimes.

'I read about real life crimes,' I answered. 'Like people burgling footballers or Russian billionaires who are trying to murder players. I research them on the internet. Once I've come across something that I think is really interesting, I make up stories based around the truth.'

'Do you use real names?' a boy asked me.

'No,' I said. 'I might use real events, but I always change people's names. I'd get into trouble otherwise.'

It was while I was answering that question that I noticed one of the teachers at the back. He was tall and athletic with dark curly hair and was wearing black jeans and a black jacket. He was staring straight at me. Something about him looked familiar, like I had seen him before. He looked angry. Maybe a bit mad.

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Just a teacher, I thought.

And the children were asking me more about the research I do, so I forgot him.

When I write a book I try to visit the place where it is set. So when I wrote a book about an Italian football club owner who was trying to make everyone in the world support his team, I went to Milan to find places I could use as a setting.

It was the same when I went to Moscow. I wanted to make up a Russian billionaire who was trying to kill England players, so Russia could beat England.

I told the children about how I went to the poshest hotel in Russia to watch rich Russians and how they all had private armies with them, four or five armed men, all dressed in black. And how, when I was in this hotel, they had watched me and one of them even pointed his gun at me as a joke.

This is all true, by the way.

The children loved that.

And the teachers seemed happy. But I did notice that the male teacher with dark hair was frowning at me.

After my talk, one of the teachers kindly drove me to the station. Part of my talk is a penalty shoot out, so I bring an inflatable goal with me and it is quite heavy. It weighs about twice as much as my daughter, who is six.

I got onto the train and started the book I was reading.

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Half an hour later I looked out of the window. It was nearly dark. *And* it was raining.

Where I live there are lots of hills. They are steep and – at dusk – when the sun is disappearing, they go black like cut-out silhouettes. I love that part of the day.

When the train came into Todmorden, where I live, I glanced at the remaining passengers.

Most of them were people on their way home from work. In suits and long coats.

There were two girls listening to the same ipod.
And a man talking on his mobile in a loud voice.

I had a quick look at everyone before getting off - and found myself face to face with the man from the back of the school hall. The man in black.

And he was looking straight back at me.
I nodded some sort of a greeting. But he just kept staring.

And, immediately, I felt like something was wrong. Maybe I'm paranoid because I write crime stories, but you don't usually see the same person in two different places on the same day.

And if you do they usually smile or nod back.

As soon as the train stopped, I jumped off, hauling my huge bag over my shoulder.

Now I had to walk.

In the dark.

In the rain.

Nearly a mile to my house.

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I walked quickly and didn't look back.

There was a wind driving up the main road in Todmorden, so I kept my head down.

And when I got home, I went in quickly and shut the door and bolted it, still unnerved by the man on the train.

Back to normality.

Some food with my family.

A cup of tea and a chat with my wife.

A bedtime story for my daughter.

Once she was asleep, I locked up. The same routine every night.

Check the locks on the front and back door.

Check the cooker is off.

Check the rabbits and the hamster are still alive.

Read for half an hour.

And, then, just after I've switched the light off, I open the blind to make sure that the front gate is shut.

And there he was.

The man in black.

Standing on the road in the rain under a street light, then, once he'd seen me, walking away, down the road, back into town.

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