

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 Three: The Runner Coming the Other Way

When I'd got home the night before I told my wife everything.

She was calm. She keeps my feet on the ground.

She said my worries that a Russian madman was coming after me were probably in my imagination, but that, if I wanted to go away for a while, that was fine.

The following day I was supposed to be touring North Yorkshire schools. I hate letting schools down, so we decided that my wife and daughter would go to her parents' house in the Midlands and I'd head up to North Yorkshire to the school.

I drove there early that morning.

On the way I tried out some of the techniques I have learned about being a detective.

I am *not* a detective and I have never *been* a detective, but one of the things I like to do when I'm writing the *Foul Play* books is learn about what I am writing about.

For instance, in one of the books – *Dead Ball*, in fact – Danny has to follow a footballer that he thinks is up to no good. He knows that there are special ways you can follow someone in public without being seen, so he goes to the library to find books about it.

He learns things like try to walk on the other side of the road to the person you are following and, that if the person you are following turns round, don't suddenly stop and look in a window, just carry on walking, even overtaking them if you have to. This way you can better avoid detection.

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I had also read about what to do to make sure you are not being followed by another car.
One, drive really slowly to see if someone is driving slowly behind you.
Two, go round a roundabout several times. That way the person following you cannot continue without being spotted.
Three, turn off the motorway at the last moment without indicating. Dangerous. But you can see what people are up to.

Anyway, I did all those things and it was clear to me that nobody was following me.
Maybe I was making it all up in my head.

I talked at three schools in North Yorkshire. 10am, 11.30am and 2pm.
Leaving the last school, I knew I needed somewhere to stay. I wasn't going home tonight.
And I had already made my mind up where I *would* like to stay.
In Middleham. A village I know well: when I was a kid my mum and dad used to take me there for holidays every year.

I drove to Middleham, still making sure I wasn't being followed.
I wasn't.

Once I had checked into the Black Bull, a pub at the bottom end of the square, I went for a run.

I like running. I do it three or four times a week.

I knew where I was going to run too. Up and along Penn Hill, one of the biggest hills in the area.

I drove to the foot of the hill, did some stretching and headed off.

It wasn't easy. The first bit is steep. But once you are on the top it is flat and you can see for miles.

And I had it all to myself.

Except for another runner, who was a couple of miles away, coming in the other direction.

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There is a special reason I love Penn Hill. Both my parents' ashes are scattered up there. They died when I was quite young. I have this strange ritual. When I have a new book published, I take a copy up there and leave it. For them to read. I had one with me today. The latest *Foul Play* book, *Killer Pass*.

Anyway, I was running along, thinking of nothing because I don't think when I run, watching the other runner coming closer and closer and thinking how it would be nice to say hello to a fellow runner, then carry on.

And I was feeling good because of the book, and because I'd got away from home, and because my family were safe with my wife's parents, and because I was starting to realise that this whole Russian thing probably was in my head.

The wind was behind me too, carrying me along.

I felt happy for the first time in a couple of days.

Until I saw the other runner come suddenly out of a dip.

It was him.

The man from the school, the train, the library. The man who had been outside my house.

I was sure.

And I panicked.

My stomach contracted. I felt like the air had been punched out of my lungs.

I turned to run back the way I had come. Fast.

The problem was I am rubbish at running fast. And rubbish at running when my heart is hammering. And at running *into* the wind. I immediately felt sick and weaker than I needed to be to run well.

Worrying that I would not be able to outrun him on the track, I scrambled down a short dip to my left and looked round to see him still coming towards me, down the hill.

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I turned and started to run again, my mind bursting with questions.

What was this all about?

Why did this man keep appearing?

Would he catch me?

And, if he did, what was he going to do to me on this moor miles and miles from anywhere?

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