

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 Four: Stranded

I made it off the hill.

When the man came down at me I went for it, bounding downwards, not worrying if I hurt myself, just trying to get away, whatever it took.

I ran.

I jumped.

I fell.

And for several minutes I didn't look back. That's what I always tell my daughter when she is running in a race. Don't look back at your competitors. Just run as fast as you can. You slow yourself down if you look back.

I only looked when I got to the bottom of the hill. Back up from where he'd come.

And there he was. The other runner. But he wasn't coming towards me. He was going back the way he'd come. Into the wind. Into the darkening evening.

I stood at the foot of that giant hill and wondered: was I going mad?

Back at my room in the pub, I called the local police.

'There's this man who is following me,' I told them. 'At least I think he is.'

They wanted more information than that.

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'I'm an author,' I said, 'and I think he is a man who I have used as a character. A murderer from Russia.'

There was a silence on the other end of the line. They thought I was a nutter. I could tell. That's because I *sounded* like a nutter.

'Can you at least keep an eye out for someone tall with dark brown curly hair?' I asked. 'I know I sound mad.'

Yes, they said. They would. Their squad car would be in the area during the night.

That night I did not sleep well.

I had told the hotel about the man too. They said no one would be able to get into the hotel without them knowing. The doors would be locked and they had a burglar alarm downstairs.

I felt safer.

But not well enough to sleep.

I lay in the dark. Thinking. And when you lie awake in the dark your thoughts take frightening turns.

At about three in the morning I put my light on.

It was useless trying to sleep. I would read and have a cup of tea. I liked reading. I liked tea. Maybe they would make me feel better.

As the kettle was boiling I went to look at the square out of the window. I enjoy staying in hotels that look over town or village centres. You can see them when there are no people there. They look very different. Often you see animals like foxes idling where they would never dare go during the daytime.

I looked down.

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There was the war memorial at the centre of the market square.
There was the Yorkshire rose flag flapping in the breeze.
There was my car, where I had parked it after coming off the hill.
And *there* was the man.

I swear my heart stopped when I saw him.
For a moment.

He was pacing round my car, trying the doors. And he seemed to have put something on top of my car too. Something small and black. The size of a book. But it wasn't a book. I knew it wasn't a book.

It was a gun.

I felt a pain in my chest. A deep and dark fear. I had *not* been imagining all this. I had seen him so many times I was either a complete madman or he was after me.

Every few seconds the man looked around the square. At the windows of the buildings. Making sure no-one was watching him, I supposed.

I stepped back from my window, flicked off the light and called the police.

'The man I reported earlier is in Middleham village square,' I said. 'He's trying to break into my car. But I am not going down because... because he's armed.'

'We'll send a squad car out straight away,' the woman on the other end of the phone said.

'Thank you,' I said, dropping my phone onto the bed.

And, as I did, there was a knock on my hotel room door.

I looked back down at the square. The man was still messing around near my car, so I felt okay to open the door.

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It was the hotel manager.

'Is everything okay, sir?' he asked. 'We heard voices.'

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'the man I told you about... he's doing something to my car.'

'Really? Let me see.'

I led him over to the window, the sound of a car going through the village filling the square.

'I can't see anyone, Mr Palmer,' he said, looking out into the darkness.

I looked down too, relieved to hear that my car was safe.

I had to look twice before I understood what was going on.

My car wasn't safe at all.

It had gone.

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