Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

Foul Play

Written by

Tom Palmer

Published by

Puffin

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

NIGHT VISION

Danny crouched when he heard the footsteps.

Then, after counting to ten, he looked carefully over the top of the wall through fragments of broken glass set into a line of concrete. There were two men. Both dressed head to foot in black. Both wearing ski hats low over their hair, their ears, their eyebrows.

This was it.

What Danny had been waiting for, sitting out in the cold every night for the past week. He felt excited. Or afraid. He wasn't sure which.

Danny watched the men, the tip of his nose touching the cold brick of the wall to make sure his head stayed still.

Neither man spoke. They communicated with nods and quick hand gestures.

At first, Danny couldn't be absolutely sure the two men were not just drinkers returning late from a night out, nipping round the back of the shops to relieve

themselves. But it would have been a coincidence that it was the back of an electrical store at three in the morning, in the same month that a dozen other similar shops had been burgled.

Anyway, whatever they were doing, they wouldn't take kindly to being watched by a fourteen-year-old boy.

Danny held his breath as the two men studied the door and windows, shining a torch through one. The beam of the torch highlighted the red brick of the buildings, a shining black drainpipe, paint-peeling window frames. It was a typical rundown back alley. Boarded up windows on the building next door. Roof slates caught in the guttering above. Broken glass underfoot, which Danny could hear crunching as the men trod on it, probably from discarded bottles that were strewn about the back of the terrace of shops.

Behind Danny there were a hundred metres of open ground: dog-walking grass and makeshift playing fields. And, beyond that, a road with a vehicle coming every thirty seconds or so.

Suddenly one of the men looked straight at Danny.

Danny didn't move. Not at first. He kept his head absolutely still. He didn't dare breathe. Carefully, he shifted his feet into a position he could launch himself from.

The man looking towards him was short. Quite thin.

Small features on his face. A moustache. Eventually the man's eyes turned from Danny towards the bag at his side. He'd not seen Danny. Maybe he'd just sensed him.

Danny watched him pull a long piece of metal out of his bag – a crowbar – then begin to touch the window frame, pressing it with his gloved hands, presumably looking for a weakness. The other man – tall, powerfully built, younger-looking – was standing next to a black wheelie bin, his back to a door, scanning the passageway he'd just come down. The smaller man began to jemmy the window, hacking at the frame, forcing the crowbar blade deep into the wood, then levering it away.

This was *defmitely* it.

Danny took out his video camera. His fingers fumbled as he took the lens cap off and pulled the mini-screen out to face him. He pushed the camera up his jumper to switch it on. He had practised this manoeuvre a dozen times in his room at home. To muffle the *ping* it made.

Had they heard?

Danny looked over the wall again.

The two men were still busy. So Danny checked the camera was on night sight and put it on top of the wall, the mini-screen angled down so he could see it. He felt as if he was in a submarine, peering through a periscope. It was so dark and cold it wasn't difficult to imagine himself underwater.

On the screen, he watched the smaller man levering hard at the window, working at the wood, then stopping, sometimes for up to a minute. But every time a car or truck came by on the busy road that ran on the other side of the row of terraces, the man would start again. Hacking at the wood.

Danny realized that he was waiting until a vehicle came past to lever the crowbar, shattering the window frame when no one would hear it above the rumble of an engine or tyres rattling over potholes.

Danny filmed the men, now focusing on their faces. First the one in the doorway. Then the one with the crowbar. He was getting good detail. This would be useful. Very useful.

His heart stopped when he saw the battery sign come up on the mini screen. He knew he had a second to switch the camera off before it made the sound to register a loss of power. But his hands weren't quick enough.

PING. PING. PING.

Danny felt like his heart had stopped. He raised his head very slightly above the top of the wall.

The two men looked in his direction and froze for a second. Then, frowning, the larger man began to move slowly towards Danny.

Danny shoved his camera into his jacket pocket.

Then he was running.

The first hundred metres were exposed ground.

Danny saw a children's playground to his right. A row of trees to his left. His mind was empty. His chest was burning.

Since he'd set off running, he'd heard nothing except the wind in his ears. No sound of footsteps coming after him. No shouting. So, as he was about to pass from the grass on to the main road, he stopped and looked back. Was anyone following him?

He strained his eyes and ears.

Nothing.

He could feel his heart going like a hammer drill and his lungs straining so much he felt like he was still running.

No one was coming.

He was safe.

It was OK.

Then, suddenly, like an animal coming out of the dark, he saw a figure moving fast. The larger of the two men. He was much bigger than Danny. Bigger, even, than Danny's dad.

Danny turned to run again, on to the pavement, scrambling to get some speed. The feel of the tarmac under his feet was hard and painful after the soft turf of the park. He crossed the road. Squinting under the glare of the streetlights.

He went up a passageway.

It was a passageway he knew well.

Even though he didn't live around here, Danny was more familiar with this part of the city than any other. It was just two hundred metres away from the football stadium where he came thirty or more times a year to watch City. And his hero, Sam Roberts, the club's top scorer.

Danny came with his father to every home game. This was the passage Danny always led his father down. Towards the stadium. To the main stand, where he would describe the game to his dad like a commentator. Danny's dad was blind.

But Danny knew that his dad and football were the last things he should be thinking about. He cleared his mind.

His ankles jarred as he ran. He could hear the man running now. Both their footsteps echoed off the walls of the passageway, putting Danny off his rhythm.

He was terrified, but focused on getting away from this man. Trying to ignore the thoughts of what he might do to Danny if he caught him.

There was a fork in the passageway coming up. If he turned left, he'd be in an estate: gardens and walls, lots of cover, but lots of open ground too. Right, and he'd be near the railway track by the yard with the knackered fence, full of old railway signs and abandoned Portakabins.

That was it.

He'd go in there.

Slip through one of the holes.

He was smaller than the man chasing him. Much smaller. He could get through the fence, into the yard and up on to the railway track, maybe. Then down into a factory. Make an escape.

'You'll have to run faster than that,' a breathless voice called after him. Much closer than Danny had realized.

Turning right, Danny glanced back and saw the man chasing him. He was less than ten metres away.

Danny put on a burst of speed. Saw the hole in the fence he'd remembered. A gap he'd walked past a hundred times.

Now he dived through, head first. He was doing OK ... until his coat snagged. Danny pulled harder, but he was stuck. He felt like a fish caught in a net. The footsteps following him stopped. He heard a scuffing, felt the man's hands on him, then a punch to his back.

'Where's that camera?' the man said in a breathless, soft voice, strong hands pulling at Danny.

Danny was in trouble now. But he had one more chance. He kicked both legs back, suspended, his coat still hooked to the fence. He felt the man's body give behind him, then heard him cough, winded.

Danny's coat ripped with the force of his kick and he was free.

He stumbled to his feet, both knees stinging with pain, and ran across the yard, hurdling old railway lights and coils of thick wire. He meant to go across the yard and find a way on to the railway track, but he was suddenly floodlit from several angles. Security lights. He felt exposed and decided to take a right and hide among the dozens of Portakabins.

About to enter the maze of prefabricated buildings, he looked back. He could see the man tearing at the fence, trying to get in, all the time staring at Danny. Danny held his gaze for a moment, knowing he'd have to find another way in.

They both heard the siren at the same time.

Danny supposed that he must have set off an alarm when he'd triggered the security lights.

The man had stopped tearing at the fence. But Danny could see him smiling.

Why?

Then Danny saw that the man was waving something in his hand. He tried to see what it was. A small piece of dark card? For a minute the man looked like a referee sending him off. Then Danny recognized it. The man was holding his notebook.

'I'll catch you later,' the man said, turning to jog back down the passageway as the siren of a police car wailed louder and louder.

PRIVATE DETECTIVE

Danny sat with his back to a Portakabin.

He was now right next to City Stadium, looking at the players' entrance and a fire exit from the side of the main stand. Danny had never been this close to the door the players slipped in and out of before and after the games. This was the car park – empty now – where all the Ferraris and Porsches would normally be parked.

After the chase, Danny's body was beginning to calm down. He felt exhausted. In his legs. His lungs. His head. What had he been thinking? Tracking burglars. Being chased through the streets by a criminal at three in the morning. Nearly being caught! And losing his notebook. How had that come out of his pocket?

Danny checked his coat. One of the pockets was torn right away.

That was how.

His mind raced through the information in the notebook. Was there anything the men could use to find him? There were newspaper clippings covering the burglaries. Flowcharts he'd drawn up himself to try to work out what the burglars were after and where they might strike next. The results of days of investigations.

It had begun with an article in the local paper. STRING OF BURGLARIES FOX LOCAL COPS. Several electrical stores had been cleaned out. Game consoles. Computers. Flat-screen TVs. DVDs. The lot. All within the city. All independent shops. None of the big chains.

As an avid reader of the newspaper's crime pages, Danny often followed all sorts of stories from the first reports, through the police investigation, the arrest of the suspects and their trials. He'd even started going to the trials, not satisfied with the sparse information in the paper.

But what Danny wanted most was to be a detective, to solve crimes himself.

At fourteen he couldn't join the police. So Danny set up his own detective agency. He called it Pinkerton's, after a famous detective agency in America. He rearranged his bedroom like an office. He got his hands on a swivel chair and an old desk. One of the desk's drawers had a lock. He kept his notebooks in there. He put up cork board on one of

the walls so he could pin newspaper articles, photos and maps to keep the most important facts out in the open, always in his mind. His mum and dad had been OK with it. They indulged him. Even supported him. But they wouldn't let him buy a new bedroom door with a frosted glass window in it, with D. HARTE, PINKERTON'S in black lettering written on it.

Danny's favourite detectives were from the crime novels he took out of the library to read to his father.

His dad had read crime and detective stories since he was a boy, before he'd been blinded in an accident at work. Now Danny spent an hour reading to his father every night, joined by shadowy detectives, murderers and the lowlife of cities across the world. His dad's favourite writers were American: Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Lots of guns and a high body count. Or the Belgian writer Georges Simenon. Danny enjoyed them, but also liked British thriller writers like Graham Greene and John Buchan.

Since he'd been reading these books, day after day, enjoying them more and more, Danny had become obsessed with crime. And its detection.

That was why he found himself video-recording burglars at three in the morning in the inner city.

His dad would kill him if he knew.

*

Sitting on the steps of a Portakabin – not wanting to go inside because of the scratching sounds he heard coming from within – Danny tried to gather his thoughts.

He noticed his arms were grazed, half a dozen red lines scored from his wrists to his elbows. Both arms. The skin had broken in places, but there wasn't much blood. It was only when he looked at them that they began to sting.

Danny wasn't afraid the burglars would be waiting for him. The police siren had been enough to scare them off. They'd have wanted to get clear of the area, rather than risk being caught. Even though he was pretty sure the police car had just been passing through, oblivious to the burglars and Danny. He'd not seen or heard anything of it since.

But Danny *was* worried that the men had his notebook. What would they find out about him? For a start, they'd know he was tracking the robberies. They might be concerned enough to try finding him. He tried hard to think if there was anything personal in the notebook, something that would lead them to him, but nothing came to mind.

Danny tried to imagine how he would feel if he knew someone was keeping a notebook about him. This was one of the techniques he'd read about in a book. The detective should put himself in the position

of all the suspects. He'd find out as much as he could about them. Then imagine he was them, feeling all the things they might feel, knowing all the things they might know. Then he'd have a better idea of what everyone was thinking and what they might do.

Danny thought that the men would be glad to have the notebook and would also be glad to get their hands on him if they could. But they probably wouldn't go out of their way to find him just because of the notebook.

The problem was the video camera. His hand touched his other pocket. It was still there. The burglars had heard it ping when it ran out of power, so they probably knew he had footage.

Danny wished *they* had the camera and *he* had the notebook.

He looked back the way he'd come, to see if either of the men had returned. There was no sign of them. He listened, but he couldn't hear anything.

He leaned against the door of the Portakabin. Five more minutes to calm down – then he'd make a move.

Two minutes later, he was flooded with light for a second time.

He eased himself back into one of the Portakabins and squatted down to avoid being seen. He could feel damp through his trousers. There were more noises

around him. Scuffling. Scratching. Scrabbling. He knew it was rats. He hated rats.

The new lights weren't coming from the Portakabin yard, so where were they coming from?

He poked his head out of the door. They were coming from the football club. The car park.

The facade of the stadium and the doorway into the players' entrance were lit up. Danny saw the club crest on the wall.

He watched closely, worried it was the headlights of the police car that had gone past earlier. He was trespassing, after all, and didn't want to be caught any more than the burglars did.

It *was* a car. But not a police car. And it couldn't be the burglars coming after him, not inside the City Stadium car park.

After watching for a few seconds, Danny came cautiously down from the Portakabin to see three men emerge from a black people-carrier in the car park. The driver and two passengers. The first passenger was a big man. Bald. White. Mean-looking. Danny had him down as a bouncer or a minder, something like that. He wished he had his notebook with him. There was so much to take in, to remember.

But what could he do?

He needed tricks. Memory tricks.

He remembered a film he'd once seen. *The Thirty-*

Nine Steps. A thriller about a man who has an amazing memory. How did *he* remember things? He'd match facts to objects. Then he could lodge them in his brain and draw them out when he needed them.

Danny looked at the scene.

Three men: three bins next to the door. That was easy.

Black people-carrier: black night.

He could just make out the registration. CP04 FRC. CP: Car Park. Number of wheels on people-carrier: 04. FRC. Football. Rugby. Cricket.

If the first man looked like a bouncer, the second looked like a banker. Danny stared at the third man, wanting to find some likeness for him that started with B, so he could remember it like a short rhyme. Bouncer. Banker. What?

Danny watched him closely. Something about him seemed familiar. He was wearing a bulky coat. And was much younger than the other two. Not greatly older than Danny. There was something about the way he moved that reminded Danny of someone.

Like other people, Danny could recognize people he knew from a distance as much from how they moved and walked, as by their faces and the colour of their hair. Say he saw a group of lads standing at the chip shop in the dinner break: even though everyone was dressed in the same school uniform,

from two hundred metres he could tell if his best mate, Paul, was among them just by the way he shuffled along.

Danny was wondering who this familiar figure was, when the man turned towards him. Danny saw his face in the dipped headlights.

It was Sam Roberts. *The* Sam Roberts.

He'd been right about him being familiar.

Except Roberts had something over his eyes. A thin bandage? Or some trendy sunglasses? No, it was definitely a bandage.

The headlights went off as Sam Roberts walked in front of them.

Now Danny wished he had power in his night vision camera to film Sam Roberts. The best player at City. The best player in the league. He'd finished the season with thirty-four goals two weeks ago. He was on his way to play in the European Championships for England, where he could prove he was the best player in Europe. With Roberts in the team, England were second favourites to win the tournament.

So what was he doing here at nearly four in the morning?

Danny assumed Roberts had been injured. Something to do with his eyes, by the look of it. He remembered after his dad's accident. A bandage across half his head. Roberts's had been a thin bandage

– just covering his eyes – but it looked bad. Why was he being taken into the stadium this late? Wouldn't it make more sense to go straight to hospital?

Danny watched the three men go into the stadium. The bouncer opened the door – there seemed to be more people inside. Two at least. Danny couldn't be sure. Then Sam Roberts went in, led by the banker.

The door into the stadium closed and Danny was left alone.

What now?

There was so much to think about.

Danny was not worried about the burglars any more. They'd have come for him by now, if they'd wanted to.

But he desperately wished he had his notebook. All the things he'd recorded in it, lost. And so much more he wanted to remember. The chase. What the burglar had said. The scene that he'd just witnessed outside City Stadium.

The sky would begin to lighten soon. A grey twilight before the sun broke over the horizon and the air warmed up. Danny knew this time of day well after one or two other nights staking out electrical stores.

The night had brought him more than he imagined it would. Enough to *fill* that notebook. He would go home via the twenty-four-hour petrol station, buy a

new notebook and write everything down before his mum and dad got up.

Then he had to decide what to do about what he had seen.

The burglars he had on film: should he show the police now?

And Roberts? He had to find out what was going on.

HAPPY FAMILIES

'You were up early.'

Dad smiled as he came into the kitchen.

It was medium-sized for a kitchen, with room for a small table and three white-box kitchen appliances. They'd had a new kitchen put in five years ago, but the chipboard kitchen units were already warped by water. And there were too many mugs. Mugs in cupboards. Mugs on mug hooks. Mugs on the mug tree. Danny's dad weeded the mugs, threw away the older ones without telling his mum. But this just made room for the new ones his mum bought or was given as gifts.

When he came in, Danny had been staring out of the window, watching cars on the main road. His dad was wearing a blue dressing gown tied at the waist, with brown pyjamas underneath. He was a tall man with a beard and a red complexion.

Did he know Danny had been out most of the night?

Danny had been sitting at the table for over an hour, scribbling in his new notebook, trying not to forget anything. He had used the memory tricks to recall the black people-carrier, the three men, the car's registration number. Now he was imagining he was there again, trying to capture every detail, the burglar, the Portakabins, Sam Roberts. If he could remember smells and sounds and even the cold air, it would trigger other memories. He'd heard a crime writer say that once on TV. Use your five senses.

'I had a bit of homework to do,' Danny said, realizing his dad was waiting for an answer.

Since his dad had lost his sight, Danny had always tried to be straight with him, but today he was anxious. So he lied.

He regretted it immediately.

'You should have done it last night, Danny. Then you could have relaxed. You sound tired.'

Danny didn't say anything. Dad took the teapot, weighed it in his hands and went to the sink to empty the old teabags out of it.

Danny felt guilt at his small lie. He remembered the day he came home from school. Six years ago. The door had opened as he came up the garden path. And he'd been surprised to see his granddad.

'Your dad's in hospital,' he'd said. 'He's had an accident. On the job.'