

The Mystery of the Stolen FA Cup Medal

Tom Palmer

Part one: introducing David Rooney, football fan

David Rooney looked at the clock above the fireplace.

Eight-thirty. Time for bed.

He picked up his portable radio, switched off the front room light and went up the staircase to his bedroom, leaving the hall light on because his mum would need it to see by when she came home at midnight.

David kept his radio on as he went up the stairs. He'd been listening to a football match and it was half time now.

Liverpool 1 United 1.

David always listened to football in the evenings. There *was* a television in the house, but most football was on satellite television and it cost £40 a month. There was no way his mum could afford that. She had to work hard enough just to put food on the table. That's what she always said.

David's mum worked in a pub in the evenings and at weekends during the day.

He didn't have a dad. Or a brother and sister.

When he'd brushed his teeth and was in his pyjamas, David looked out across the housing estate where he lived. There was a group of kids from the high school standing outside the shops. They were kicking an empty Coke can around on the floor.

David closed the curtains quickly and got into bed.

He had until half past ten to read. Then it was lights out. That was his mum's rule. And he always stuck to his mum's rules.

David picked up a book he'd borrowed from the library. An Illustrated History of United Football Club. And then he was lost in the facts and pictures about his favourite team, as he listened to the match.

David was allowed to stay up until 9.30pm. That's when matches finished usually.

An hour later David's light was off and his eyes were shut. United had drawn at Liverpool. 2-2. So he was neither happy nor sad.

This was one of his favourite bits of the day. He closed his eyes and pretended he had been at the United game, chanting with the crowd, celebrating the goals. He did this every night. This was how he got to sleep without his mum being in the house. It was something he'd taught himself.

Although he lived less than a mile from United's stadium, David had never been to see them play. That cost £50 a ticket. Too much.

Sometimes noises interrupted David's football fantasies.

The kids on the street outside.

Police cars going past with their sirens blasting.

And, sometimes, noises from next door.

David had never met his next door neighbour. In fact, he barely knew anyone in the street where he lived. But he knew some things about the old man next door.

He knew he went to bed at 10pm. Because that was the time he could hear him brushing his teeth and switching his light off.

He also knew that every Saturday – and sometimes Sunday – a posh car would arrive and the old man would get into it and be away for a few hours. That that was the only time the man went out in a week.

David had asked his mum what she knew about the old man. But mum had said he was just an old man and she didn't want David talking to strangers.

Part two: Playing football in the back garden

When his mum went out at 6pm, David often played football in the back garden. It was a small garden, ten paces by ten paces, but he was able to kick a ball around. He practiced keepy-uppies. His record was 347.

The day after the Liverpool-United game, David was playing the back garden, trying to do keepy-uppies with his feet and his head.

That's when it happened for the first time.

He kicked the ball high, then headed it, then kicked it again and then – losing control – it flew over the high fence and into the next garden.

David frowned. He'd lost his ball! His only ball! His life would be rubbish without a ball. And there no way he could get it back. He didn't know whose garden it was.

He was just about to start crying when, like a miracle, the ball came back, perfectly weighted to his feet.

David was startled. How had that happened?

He was so amazed – and so puzzled – that he kicked the ball back over the fence. Just too see what would happen next?

The answer came quickly. The ball was lofted back to him.

So he headed it over the fence again.

And it came back. Again.

This went on until it was dark, when David had to go in.

He shouted thank you to whoever had been kicking the ball to him. But no-one replied.

That night, as he went to sleep, David did not think about playing for United. His mind was too busy wondering who was on the other side of the fence. Was it another child? Or a man? It certainly couldn't be the old man's back garden. There was no way an old man would be able to play football like that.

Part three: The man who came over the fence

The next Saturday, when mum was working and David was watching Football Focus, a television show that previews the weekend's football matches, on TV, he saw the posh car pull up in front of the old man's house.

As usual a man in a uniform got out of the car and went to knock on the old man's door. And, as usual, he walked alongside the old man as he made his way to the car.

Where does he go? David asked himself. And, why does a posh car collect him? Most people round here have to get the bus or walk. Barely anyone has a car.

David gazed after the car as it went, then turned the television off. Football Focus had finished. It was time for him to get his radio and listen to the first football commentary game of the day.

His mum would be home later and she had promised that they could go for a walk along the canal.

David found his radio in his mum's room. She'd borrowed it to listen to something on the radio that morning. His mum's room looked out over the back of the houses. Into the gardens.

David had never seen anyone in the garden next door. But he looked again, like he always had, since the football had come back over to him so many times.

The garden was empty. No people. No flowers or plants. Not much grass.

And then David saw something else. Someone coming over the fence at the back of the houses. A young man wearing a baseball cap and scarf around his face.

David watched the man walk swiftly across the garden next door, then disappear from view. He waited and then heard something coming from the house next door. Bumps. Noises of someone opening and closing drawers.

Someone was burgling the old man's house!

David wasn't sure what to do.

Should he phone the police? Tell them what was happening?

He decided he should phone his mum first.

The phone took a long time to be answered, but eventually he spoke to her.

'Mum, someone's gone into the house next door. They climbed.'

'What is it David?' she replied. 'I'm at work.'

'I think someone has broken into the house next door.'

'Broken in? Are you okay?'

'Not our house,' David said more clearly. 'Next door. They climbed over the fence.'

'Oh. Are you sure?'

'Yes. Shall I call the police?'

'No,' his mum said quickly.

'Why?'

'I've told you. We mustn't get involved in things like that.'

David knew what she meant. Sometimes if people saw a crime and told the police, bad things would happen to them. In their part of town most people just kept quiet.

When mum had put the phone down, David felt bad. It was wrong that someone was in next door's house. He could still hear them.

Then he had an idea. There was a phone number you could call. Crimestoppers. You could phone and report a crime without giving your name.

David grabbed the phone. He talked to the lady on Crimestoppers and explained what he had seen. The lady thanked him and said a police car would come out to investigate soon.

David sat and looked out of the back window. He hoped the police would come in time.

But they didn't.

After a few more minutes he saw the man in the baseball cap leaving the house, climbing the fence, but struggling this time, because of something he had in his hand.

Then he heard a police siren.

The man in the baseball cap reacted by running in one direction, putting his hands against a wall, then quickly running the other way.

David rushed to the front of the house to look out of the window. The police were looking into the old man's house through the windows. After a while they posted something through the letter box and drove off.

And that was it.

Part four: the Newspaper Report

David had had a lovely day with his mum. They'd got the train to the seaside. They'd had ice creams and later, fish and chips for lunch.

When they got home they dropped into the local shop and bought some potatoes and beans for their dinner. Mum also bought a local newspaper.

When they got home Mum put the potatoes in the microwave oven. David sat in the kitchen with her, looking at the newspaper.

A photo on the front page shocked him.

It was a picture of an old man.

But not any old man. It was the old man who lived next door.

And underneath he read the headline

UNITED HERO'S CUP FINAL MEDAL STOLEN

David read on: 'Arthur Stevens, the last surviving player from United's Cup winning team of 1952, returned from watching United's 3-0 home victory against Chelsea, to find his cup winning medal had been stolen from his house. Police have asked for help from the public.'

David couldn't believe that the old man next door was a former United player.

'Mum.'

'Yes love.'

'Look.'

His mum looked. Frowning as she did.

'That's what the man in the baseball cap was after,' David said.

His mum nodded.

'Can I phone the police?' David asked.

Mum looked scared.

'Mum?'

'David, love,' she said, 'It's best we stay out of it.'

'But I saw...'

'I know you did love. But you know what happened to those people who reported the robbery at the shop.'

David frowned. 'But I want to help him. The old man. He's a star footballer!'

Mum shook her head.

'What if I phone Crimestoppers?' David pleaded.

'No.'

And that was it. David could do nothing.

That night David went to bed early. He felt strange. He had never in his life before thought his mum was wrong about something. But he thought she was about this. If no one reported the crime, the thief would get away with it and the old man would never get his medal back.

David went to the top of the stairs, thinking he should go and argue with his mum.

Something he had never done either.

And then he heard her voice. She was on the telephone.

'Is that Crimestoppers?' she asked.

And David smiled. She *was* calling the police after all.

Part five: David has an idea

David thought the crime might have been solved after his mum's call to the police, but nearly a week later, that week's local paper came out and there was still no news about the missing FA Cup Final medal.

That night, after he'd listened to a football debate on the radio, David switched the light off. He lay in the dark wondering how the old man would be feeling. That medal must be one of his prize possessions. Maybe his favourite thing in the world. And someone had just stolen it.

David drifted off to sleep feeling miserable.

Then, sometime later, still in the dark, he woke with a start. He'd been dreaming. Or thinking. He wasn't sure which. And in his dreams – or thoughts – he'd remembered something.

The man with the baseball cap. He'd run one way, then the other, when he heard he police car coming.

That had seemed strange to David at the time. The way he'd run to the wall, then come back running the other way. But he'd not given it any more thought.

Now he was. Because what if... what if the man had hidden the medal there?

David had heard that thieves sometimes hid the things they stole. Especially when someone was after them. Maybe he'd hidden it in the wall... and maybe it was still there.

The next morning, David told his mum he wanted to talk to the old man next door.

'No,' she said.

'But I think I...'

'No.'

'Why not? I...'

'We don't know him, David.'

'But I..'

'No.'

David felt angry now. Angry with his mum. Why was she like this about people in their neighbourhood? Why didn't she want to be friendly with them?

'I think that's stupid,' he said.

'Right, that's it David,' she said. 'You are grounded all weekend. No going out. Not even to the shops.'

David hung his head. Now he'd ruined his weekend. And he could do nothing to help the old man.

Part six: don't *talk* to strangers

When his mum went out to do her Saturday morning shift in the pub, David went out to play football in the back garden.

Football Focus was not on the television for another hour, so all he could do was play football.

But he quickly became bored.

So bored that he decided to take a risk. He wanted to make something happen, make things change. So, on purpose, he kicked his ball over the fence to the garden that he now knew was the old man's.

Would it come back? He wasn't sure.

But seconds later, it did. A perfect ball, landing at his feet.

David found it hard to believe that it was the old man kicking the ball back to him. But it had to be. And if he'd been good enough to play in an FA Cup Final sixty years ago, maybe he was still good enough now.

David and his mystery football partner kicked the ball to and fro for a while. He desperately wanted to tell the old man about the wall. But he also wanted to do what his mum had told him. That being: don't speak to anyone about it.

Don't speak, he thought. *But what if...*

Quickly David went into the house and got a large piece of paper and a rubber band. He wrote something on the paper, then wrapped it round the ball with the rubber band. Then he kicked the ball over the fence.

This time the ball did not come back straight away.

David heard a rustle of paper.

Then the ball came back, but without the piece of paper.

That night David's mum had to do an extra shift at the pub. She phoned him at home and told him to make his own dinner. She said she'd be back late, but that they'd use the extra money to go on a surprise trip the next day.

David agreed and put the phone down so he could listen to the football on the radio.

Part seven: a special occasion

The next morning they had bacon sandwiches for breakfast. This was a big treat. They normally only had that on birthdays or special occasions.

And today felt like a special occasion. It's just David didn't know why.

'Here are we going today, then?' he asked his mum.

'It's a surprise,' Mum said, looking out of the window. 'You'll know soon enough.'

David sat eating his bacon sandwich, wondering what the special day out would be.

He fantasised that it would be a trip to watch United play today. They were kicking off at midday. But he knew that would cost way too much. So he forgot the thought.

At half-past-ten David saw the posh car arrive outside the old man's house, like it often did. He watched the driver in his uniform come out of the car, open the back door, then walk towards the old man's front door.

Except he wasn't walking to the old man's front door, he was walking towards their front door.

'Mum!' David shouted from the front room into the hallway, where he had heard her.

Then he saw his mum in the doorway, standing with two coats. His and hers.

And she was grinning.

'Come on, love,' she said. 'This is your surprise.'

The surprise was the most surprising surprise David had ever known.

First he met the old man. The former United player.

Then he saw that he was wearing a medal. His FA Cup Final medal.

Then the man thanked him for solving the mystery. The medal had been hidden in the wall. David had been right. And the old man said that he wanted to take David and his mum out for the day to say thank you.

Next they drove to United's stadium.

Then they went inside.

And watched the game.

And met the current United players.

And David got to shake each of their hands and hear them all say thank you to him for solving the mystery of the missing Cup Final medal.

That night when David closed his eyes, he did not need to make up stories to make his life feel more exciting.

Now he had memories. Real memories of watching United and meeting players.

Tom Palmer – March 2011