



Changing life stories

# Defenders: Russia Chapter 2

A *live* World Cup story by Tom Palmer

**Seth White used to see people from the past, people who were supposed to be dead. He thought all that was behind him, but – as he settled down on the sofa yesterday to watch Russia hammer Saudi Arabia 5-0 in the opening game of the World Cup – he saw something... saw someone... that made him fear it could all happen again. What Seth didn't know is that – this time – he, and England's World Cup campaign, were under threat.**

## **ДВА**

Seth sat right in front of the TV, scanning the Luzhniki Stadium crowd. Thousands of fans cheering and dancing behind Robbie Williams and Aida Garifullina, the Russian opera singer, as they performed *Let Me Entertain You*.

Seth was searching for the boy. The boy in the brown coat who seemed, before, to be staring right at him. Had he just imagined him?

Seth saw fireworks. Dancers. Aida's white dress and Robbie's red suit. But he had no sight of the boy. He'd seen him so briefly before, amid a sea of red, white and blue striped flags, that he was now starting to doubt he had even seen him at all.

Seth's phone pinged, making him jump. A text coming in. He glanced to see that it was from Nadiya.

**U ok? U didn't wait for me.**

Seth felt guilty that he hadn't stayed on for Nadiya after school. He would apologise to her later. For now, he needed to keep scanning the crowd.

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After a few minutes, Seth had still seen nothing. He began to feel relief. Maybe he wasn't at the start of a new haunting. Maybe everything was going to be okay.

After Robbie and Aida left the centre circle stage, a balding man in a blue suit and red tie gave a speech. Seth knew who he was. Vladimir Putin. The leader of Russia.

The camera was fixed on Putin for what seemed like ages. Five minutes of blah-blah-blah at least. Seth felt bored after two.

'Come on,' he shouted at the TV. 'I want to watch the football. Not this.'

His dog, Rosa, had come back into the room and sat down by the door looking at Seth, her tail thumping slowly and uneasily on the floor.

After the speeches, Seth began to relax. He even smiled. Yes, he clearly had been imagining things. He settled back on the sofa. The national anthems made it feel more like a World Cup match and Seth put his feet up on the coffee table and breathed out.

Saudi Arabia's anthem first. Seth studied the row of child mascots standing in front of the players, each wearing a yellow top and red shorts, all smiling as the cameras panned the Saudi players.

Next the Russian anthem started up. Seth watched as the first Russian player and his mascot came on the screen.

He cried out: 'No!'

It was him. The boy.

Rosa was on her feet, barking.

Seth gawped in horror as the boy stared back at him. Hard eyes. Cold eyes. Hypnotic eyes. And now Seth felt like he was falling or spinning or fainting, he didn't have time to think which. It just happened. He felt sick, his senses overloaded.

He heard new noises around him. And the air moving, like he was outside, not in his front room at all.

He opened his eyes. He was in a row of children. A camera woman was staring at him down a lens. Behind her, thousands of people were waving flags. Blue and red and white flags.

Seth understood immediately where he was. He was in Russia. In the Luzhniki stadium. At the World Cup.

Next he felt a hand on his shoulder and looked to his right to see that it belonged to the boy from the screen. The boy was next to him, wearing a yellow top and red shorts, his face so pale it was almost translucent.

The Russian national anthem played in the background.

What *was* this?

Seth had to know. 'Who are you?' Seth turned and asked the boy.

The pale hand was still on his shoulder. It hurt Seth. He couldn't move, like the iron grip was paralysing him.

'I am a king, a saint,' the boy said in a dry whispery voice. He spoke in Russian, but Seth could somehow understand every word.

A king?

A saint?

What was the boy talking about?

This was mad.

The boy handed Seth a piece of folded paper. Seth stared down, unfolded it, to see a faded photograph of the boy holding something up to the camera.

'You are the only one who can help me,' the boy said.

'How? I don't understand.'

'This is mine,' he said pointedly. 'I need it back. You must discover where it has gone.'

'But why me? How do I find that? What even is it?'

'An egg,' the boy said. 'I will come for you when England play. Know by then.'

'Why?'

'Stop asking questions. If you won't help me, if you fail me, I will see to it that England lose to Tunisia. Do you understand?'

Something clicked then in Seth's head. It was the way the boy was talking to him. He was sick of feeling scared. Because now he was angry. Who was this boy to threaten him? To threaten to make England, lose? No way!

Seth pulled away from the boy's grip. If this boy *was* going to make England lose, then this was serious. Because, if England lost to Tunisia, then they had no real chance of qualifying for the next stage of the competition.

'No,' Seth said as his head began to spin again.

His eyes closed.

Darkness.

Then he was back home on his sofa. On the TV screen the boy's pale face disappeared as the camera moved on to the other mascot children.

The Russian national anthem ended to huge cheers from the home crowd at the Luzhniki stadium.

When Nadiya arrived at Seth's she saw her friend was staring solemnly at the TV. He didn't say hello. Rosa did. After greeting the dog, Nadiya turned to Seth.

'Seth?'

No reply.

'Seth?' she tried again.

Nothing.

'Football's boring,' she shouted. 'Football's rubbish. I'm going to turn the TV off.'

Surely that would provoke him?

Silence still.

Nadiya looked at the screen to Russian forwards attacking the Saudi Arabia goal.

She noticed the clock in the top corner: 11 minutes, 40 seconds.

Then chaos in the Saudi Arabia goalmouth. A Russian header. And a goal, Russian players streaming to the corner of the pitch to celebrate. Nadiya watched the replay, then turned to Seth. He hadn't moved. His face and body hadn't changed since she had arrived.

Now she *was* worried.

'SETH?'

Still no reaction.

Nadiya realised she had to be careful. She noticed a piece of paper in Seth's hand. She prized it gently from his fingers. It was a crumpled photograph. An old one. A boy holding something.

Nadiya studied it closely for a while, turning it over, trying to make sense of it.

Then she heard Seth's voice. 'He said it was an egg.'

'What?' Nadiya squinted at the photograph.

'An egg.'

The object the boy was holding in the photograph was egg-shaped, but it was more like an ornament, a large blue and gold bejewelled egg, a fraction smaller than the boy's head. And something flickered in Nadiya's memory. She enjoyed reading history books and watched loads of history programmes on the TV. She had an idea about what this might be.

Maybe.

'He said... he said, if I don't find out where it is, then he'll make sure England lose their opening game to Tunisia on Monday.'

Nadiya laughed.

'It's not funny,' Seth said.

'It is,' Nadiya said. 'No one can do that.'

Seth shook his head. 'Nadiya. This feels like last time. But worse. It's stronger. That boy – whoever he is – is strong. Powerful. I really think he will do what he threatened. Unless we help him.'

As Seth watched Russia destroy the Saudi defence four more times, Nadiya picked up her phone and began to search online. She needed answers if she was going to help her friend. And – if Seth was right – to help her country.

**The challenge is set. Can Seth and Nadiya work out what the boy in the Luzhniki Stadium was talking about? Can they give him the information he wants? And would he – really – be able to make England lose if the two children fail in their quest.**

**Chapter 3 of *Defenders: Russia* will be published before 7.30 a.m. on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> June. Some time next week you will have the chance to vote on what you would like to happen next from two or three options. More about that soon. Thank you for reading and have a wonderful World Cup weekend!**

**Thanks to West Thornton Primary School for the great idea of Seth visiting Russia via his TV and for helping me workshop lots of other ideas.**

**Tom visited Russia in 2009 to research his book, *Dead Ball*. You can find out more about his trip and his tour of the Luzhniki Stadium here: <http://tompalmer.co.uk/foul-play/dead-ball/>**

World Cup word of the day

# Imagined

