THE WRONG SHOES

Other Books by Tom Percival

THE WRONG SHOES

TOM PERCIVAL

SIMON & SCHUSTER

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd

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Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor, 222 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HB

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Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

[HB] ISBN 978-1-3985-2712-6
eBook ISBN 978-1-3985-2715-7
eAudio ISBN 978-1-3985-2713-3

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Typeset in the UK by Sorrel Packham

Printed and bound in the UK
using 100% renewable electricity
at CPI Group (UK) Ltd

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Dedication TK

ACT ONE

CHAPTER ONE

THIS IS NO FAIRY TALE.

Not unless it's one of those *really* old-fashioned ones, where basically a whole load of terrible stuff happens to some poor unsuspecting kid. I guess I should count myself lucky that a wolf hasn't dressed up like my nan and tried to eat me yet. But you know what? Even then, even in those stories where people get ripped in half, chewed up and spat out, *eventually* there's a happy ending. And that's the difference, see? Because this is just my life, and *nothing's* guaranteed.

Well . . . that's quite a downer, right? You don't even know me yet, and I'm already getting all bleak! Still, let's start as we mean to go on, as my dad would say.

So I guess we might as well start here, and what do you know? It's raining. I mean, no surprise, right? Of *course* it's raining, just to make my day that little bit worse. Let me explain . . . There's a split in the sole of my shoe, right on the ball of my foot, like a little mocking mouth that opens and closes each time I take a step.

And what does that mean when it rains? You've guessed it – it means a wet foot!

And who likes having a wet foot? You're absolutely correct – *nobody*!

I mean, I know that things could be worse, and you've got to have a sense of proportion, but, even so, a cold, wet foot can get you down pretty quickly. So that's STRIKE ONE against my shoes – they let water in, which is pretty much a fundamental *no-no* as far as I'm concerned. But even when they were brand new, and didn't leak at all, they were *still* horrible. They were *always* wrong.

Dad says we can probably make them last until the end of the year, so long as I don't grow any more. I think that was one of his jokes – but it's hard to say. It used to be easy to tell when Dad was joking – his eyes would light up, and so would I – everything would feel warm and we'd both laugh – you know, *properly* laugh.

That doesn't happen so much now.

Either way, these are my shoes, and there's no way round it. Still, on the plus side, I don't need to worry about anyone stealing them – who'd want them?

So I'm hurrying through the rain, hoping to get to

school as quickly as possible. I suppose that makes me sound all super academic – but it's more that its warm and dry there, and, I tell you what, it's pretty much winter now and our flat is freezing!

So this is what I do every morning (apart from weekends and the holidays *obviously*) – I drag myself out of bed, through the door and off to school. Sometimes I meet up with Cameron along the way. He's my best friend and lives across town – but it might as well be a whole other world really – a world of nicely painted doors, big gardens and Land Rovers parked on the driveway.

But, on this particular morning, I don't see Cameron – I don't see anyone. Well, no one that I want to – although I *do* see Chris Tucker. He's pretty much the worst. Some kids seem to like him, or pretend to like him, or whatever. I think they're just scared of him, to be honest.

He started going to the gym in town a while back, even though he's only in the year above me, so still too young to be *meant* to go. But his brother knows the guy who

runs the gym, and if people are scared of Chris, then I don't even know the word for how they'd feel about his brother. Basically he's not someone that you say 'no' to – not if you like the way your face looks.

So now Chris walks around with his chest all puffed out and his arms swinging out from his body, like his muscles are *so* big he can't hold his arms by his sides any more (they're not, and he could), but none of that really matters, because even though his muscles aren't actually *mega* big, he's still pretty hard – *definitely* harder than me – and he knows it.

Chris *loves* to have a little chat with me. I'm, like, one of his favourite people because he can rip it out of me for my shoes, my coat, my bag, whatever. We're *so tight* he's even got a nickname for me, which him and his 'mates' think is the funniest thing ever.

As soon as I see him on the road, I put my headphones on and turn the music up so I can pretend not to have noticed him. It seems to have worked until I feel the headphones pulled off my ears.

'Hey, Poundland,' he says, lips curling up in a grin, 'what's going on?'

'Oh, hey, Chris. Nothing really, just . . . you know . . . going to school.'

'Well, *durr*!' he says.

I shrug and try to put my headphones back on, but Chris keeps hold of them.

'So you been doing those doodles again –' Chris nods at the designs I've drawn on my bag in marker pen, a fat smile snakes across his face as he finishes his sentence – 'Doodler?'

This is what Chris does. He's like a fisherman waiting by the river, casting out his line, trying to get a bite so he can reel you in. He's only saying that to get a rise out of me, but do you know what? It doesn't work – I'm actually proud of *that* nickname.

A couple of years ago, I got into the local paper for doing some pictures on the wall of a cafe. It was owned by this woman called Sally, a friend of my mum's. She'd seen my drawings round at ours one evening and asked

me to do some doodles outside the bathrooms in her cafe. Lots of people liked them, and she asked me to do some more in the main cafe. In the end I pretty much covered a whole wall! I remember we all went out one night – me, Dad and Mum, all together – for the big unveiling. That was when someone from the paper took the photo of me in front of the wall and christened me the Doodler. Lots of kids used to call me that for a while.

That feels like a long time ago and the cafe's closed now. It's a shame. Sally used to give me free drinks whenever I went in. Tell you what, I could really do with *that* right now.

'Come on, I bet you've got *something* to show off,' presses Chris. 'You're always scribbling away. Let's have a look!'

'Give it a rest,' I say. 'It's hammering down! I'm not getting my sketchbook out here.'

'I just want a *look*,' he says, hands raised in a shrug, making out like he's being totally reasonable.

'Leave it out, I don't want to be late for school.'

'Fair enough, *goody-goody*.'

And that's it. Chris lets go of my headphones and steps aside, letting me walk past. I breathe a small silent sigh of relief.

Moments later, I feel a sharp tugging on my back as he yanks the bag off my shoulder. Dad's always on at me to wear my bag with both straps across my back. For once I wish that I did.

'Get off!' I shout.

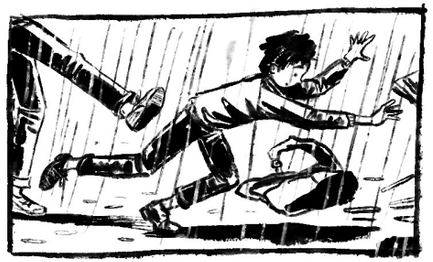
'Ooh, *feisty*!' replies Chris in a sing-song voice.

'Seriously, get lost, all right?' I try to grab my bag, but Chris laughs as he holds my arm back. Like I said, he's not massive or anything but what I *didn't* say is just how skinny *I* am.

'What is *that*?'

Chris has pulled out my sketchbook and is holding it open with one hand. I watch as blunt bullets of rain explode across my drawing. Ink pools and then runs down the paper as the picture of a dragon, which is curled across the pages, bleeds and runs. The ferocity I gave the dragon while I was drawing it is meaningless

now – the powerful figure riding on its back is dressed in chainmail that's useless against the rain. A moment later, the dragon's sharp fierce eye is obliterated by

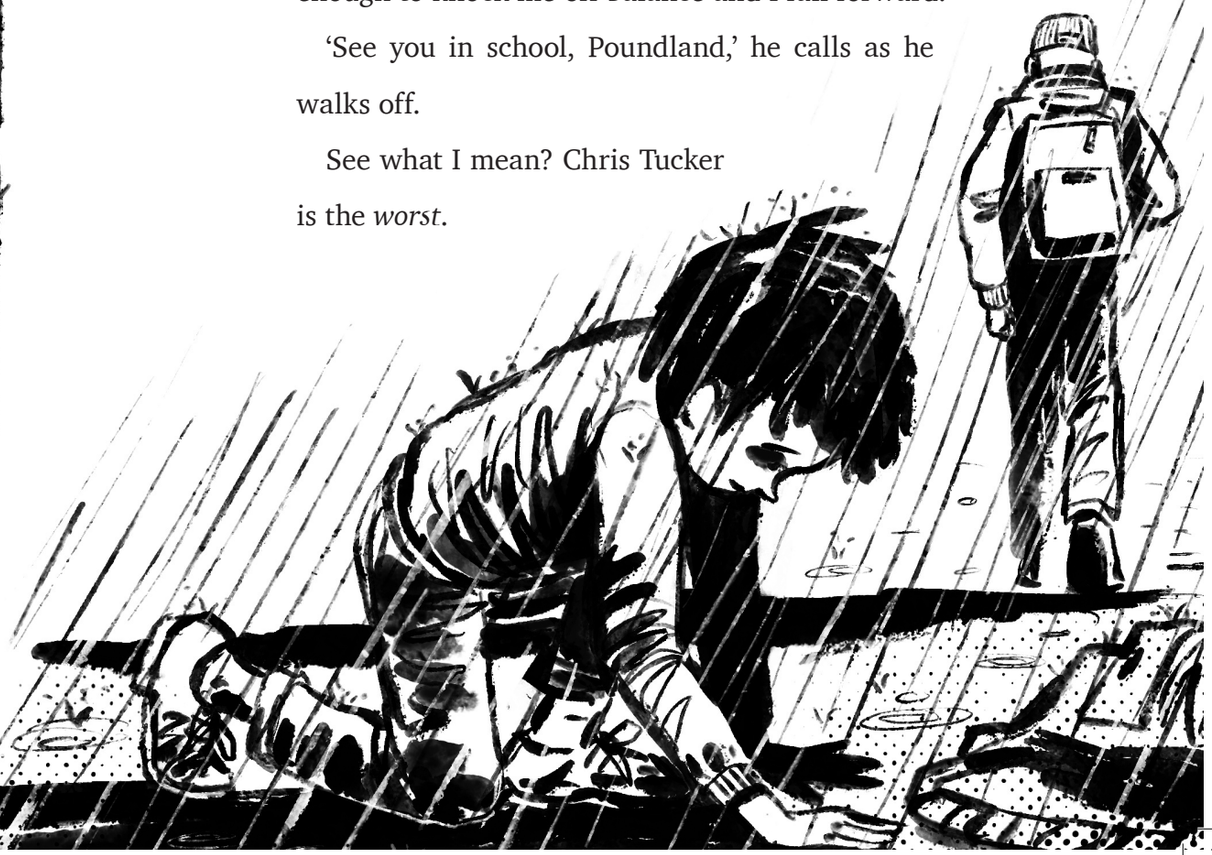


the rain dripping off the edge of Chris's hood.

'You're a secret Dungeons and Dragons nerd?' he says. 'That is SO . . . well, so *typical*, I guess!'

He tosses my sketchbook back towards me. I totally miss it, *obviously*, and it lands on the thin patch of grass by the pavement.

As I'm bending down to pick it up, he pushes me slightly with his foot; it's not even a shove really, just enough to knock me off balance and I fall forward.

'See you in school, Poundland,' he calls as he walks off.

See what I mean? Chris Tucker is the *worst*.