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Light Shining in the Forest

Written by Paul Torday

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Light Shining in the Forest

PAUL TORDAY

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This book is a work of fiction. Some of the details about Northumberland and the Kielder Forest, and horrific crimes perpetrated upon children in the past, are true, but all the details of the story and all the characters that appear in it are imaginary. Any resemblance between the fictional characters and real people is entirely coincidental.

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Catherine Meyer, founder of the children's charity, Parents and Abducted Children Together, said: 'The truth is we don't know how many children go missing, which is an appalling state of affairs. But the best estimate we have shows that every five minutes a child goes missing in the UK. It is really quite shocking,' she added.

—Mike Sullivan, Crime Editor, the *Sun*, 11 October 2007

One

Kielder Forest lies along the English and Scottish Borders. A few hundred years ago, all this part of the world was a desolation of mires and low, heather-covered hills. Its inhabitants – more then than there are now – were once considered masterless men, who acknowledged no king and lived by violence and cunning. The Border clans were known as 'reivers' and they lived on either side of the Border: in Liddesdale, Teviotdale, Redesdale and Tynedale: clans such as the Armstrongs, Bells, Charltons, Dodds, Elliots, Kers, Nixons and Scotts. They stole from each other and fought with each other. The Border region was difficult for any king to control, whether he was king of Scotland or England. For a while, it was known as the Debatable Land.

It is an empty and silent country. Even today, on this crowded island, there are spaces along the Borders where you can walk for a day without ever seeing another human being.

The country itself has changed. Once there were grey-green hills, covered in rushes and heather. Steep-sided denes scored the hillsides; thick with birch, alder, willow, oak and pine. These ancient woods have now been replaced by a patchwork of huge forests: Wark, Kielder, Redesdale, Harwood, Newcastleton, Craik, Tinnisburn, Spadeadam and Kershope, spread across hundreds of square miles. Tens of millions of

trees: Sitka Spruce, Norway Spruce, Lodgepole Pine, Larch, Scots Pine; a dark host only occasionally relieved by avenues of broadleaves. Who lives there now? A few forestry communities, scattered villages and isolated hamlets. Foxes, deer, buzzards, goshawks, jays, magpies, ravens and crows far outnumber the human inhabitants. Once there were red and black grouse living in the heather-clad hills, and grey partridge in the white grassland. But the predators that live among the trees, the hawks and the foxes, have dealt with most of these. Nothing much else lives here; nothing except the trees themselves.

Intersecting the forest is a labyrinth of graded roads. Each year several million trees are planted and as many more are extracted, taken by road down to the chipboard factory in Hexham, or to the Tyne docks, or to the stockyards of timber businesses and fencing contractors. Most of what is logged is softwood, not suited for joinery or cabinet-making, and destined for some industrial purpose. The roads are cut through the forest as they are needed, and then abandoned, chained off to prevent access, quickly overtaken by weeds, and then by regenerating pine and fir. Kielder Forest alone covers two hundred and fifty square miles, and its siblings cover maybe twice that area.

Before the trees came, this was a land of marshes and rolling grass hills. Across the hills ran the old droving roads along which sheep were driven to markets further south, or else to the strongholds of the local clans. The place names recall the former nature of the land and its people: Haggering Holes, Bessie's Bog, Bloody Bush, Foulmire Heights, Gray Mare Moss. The mires and moss were a perfect protection for the reivers who once inhabited this region.

It was a landscape of a thousand soft colours: the subtle shades of heathers, bog myrtle, sphagnum moss, cotton grass,

lichens and the whites and browns of the grasslands: an infinitely varied palette, changing with every shift of light from the cloudy, windy skies above. Now only corners of this older world can be glimpsed in places where it has not yet been submerged in the sea of conifers.

Many of the trees were planted in the 1920s as part of a national undertaking to replace timber consumed in the trenches in France during the First World War. Much later, an enormous lake appeared in the forest. It was created by damming the headwaters of the North Tyne – seventeen miles of it between tree-clad banks – to provide water for industry further east. A drowned village lies beneath its waves. As for the trees, it is difficult to know what purpose they now have: they have become an end in themselves, a reason for their own existence. The trees are there because the trees are there.

Geordie Nixon has worked in forestry for most of his life. His father and his grandfather were woodmen. His father tended the private forestry of a local estate. In those days trees were still worth money: ash, beech and oak for furniture; larch was once cropped for ship's masts. Now a tide of cheap timber from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has made home-grown woodlands close to worthless. His father was made redundant and died young, aged sixty. His mother died a few years later, still working as a cleaner.

Geordie began by helping his father during the school holidays. When he was sixteen, he left school and started work as a fencing contractor. He's done fencing, planting, weeding amongst the young trees. Now he's registered as a lone worker and he harvests the trees in Kielder for the Forestry Commission.

He has known nothing else. He visits Hexham, the nearest

town of any size. He's been to Newcastle, the nearest city, twice. He's never been to London, and has no plans to go there. He barely knows where London is. What he does know is the forest, and the birds and the animals that live there. Almost every day he sees the deer lifting their heads to look at him as he drives deep into the forest in his truck. In their season he hears the vixens shouting. He knows where the badger setts are. From time to time, he hears the scream of a rabbit being taken by a hawk. These sounds and shapes and sights are his company when he works in the forest. He works in all weathers: in the faint sunshine that sometimes filters down through the trees; in driving rain; sometimes in the soft and soundless fall of snow, when the forest seems to go to sleep under its white blanket.

You don't find men like Geordie Nixon in towns. You find few men like Geordie anywhere. He's a big man, over six feet tall, and he looks as tough as the trees he cuts down. He has a square, pale face and grey eyes under thick black eyebrows.

His life is work. The money comes in and it goes out even faster. Geordie knows he won't die a rich man. He doesn't think much about the future. He knows he has to meet the lease payments on his vehicles and his HP on the forty-inch HD television in the flat. He has to pay his girlfriend, Mary, his share of the rent on her flat, and his share of the food and heating. He owns nothing except the clothes he stands in, his chainsaw and his mobile phone.

At first light, Geordie Nixon is working with the chainsaw and is already well into the area of forest marked out for clear-felling. He cuts away the small trees and other bits of rubbish to allow the harvester to reach the bigger trees that have to be felled and logged. By eight-thirty, he is cutting down trees in his harvester, a second-hand Valmet 941. It is tracked, to cope

with the soft ground. Rubber tyres would just dig in and sink. The whole of this forest grew out of bottomless mires, or else fell land full of sharp rocks.

Geordie is contracted to cut down a block of thirty-year-old Sitka Spruce. The harvester grinds and chugs and whines as its hydraulically powered jaws grab a tree and then bite into its base. In a few seconds the tree has been cut, but it is not allowed to fall: instead the harvester tilts the tree over in its jaws and strips off the branches and most of the bark, then cuts it to length before placing it on top of a growing pile of poles beside the forest track.

Geordie works alone. It's what he prefers. There isn't the money in the job to pay the wages of another man. Once he would have had a lad helping with the stacking of the felled timber, so that he didn't have to load up his truck at the end of the day. Now he has to do it himself. But even Geordie knows about market forces. He's seen the price of timber go down year after year.

Every now and then, he stops to take a nip of lukewarm tea from his Thermos, or else to light a cigarette. When he switches off the engine of the harvester, the silence of the forest is uncomfortable. At midday he stops again and eats the packed lunch – his 'bait', he calls it – that Mary has put up for him the night before: processed cheese slices in a bap, with not enough butter. He eats the dry food mechanically, and swallows the last of his tea. Although it is only early April, there is a hatch of midges. These trouble him whenever he opens the door of the cab. Around him a soft light filters through the forest canopy: a hint of the sun far above the clouds, just enough to gleam on the wet cobwebs on every branch, on the wet bracken by the edge of the wood, on the pools of water lying everywhere. From his cab, Geordie can see down into the

shallow valley on whose upper slopes he is working: nothing but spruce and pine, nothing but trees in their endless dark tangles. The light turns greyer in the afternoon as the cloud thickens. Dusk comes early to these places: beneath the shadow of the trees it never really leaves.

At four o'clock he locks up the harvester and walks down to the forest track where he's parked his truck. This is a big Scania tractor-trailer, with a jib-crane at the back for loading up the timber. That and the harvester are leased to him by a finance company.

He has a girlfriend, Mary, whom he thinks of as his 'lass'. Once they had a child as well.

He begins loading the stacked timber from the roadside onto his truck. This is a hard task that requires patience: stack it badly, and it might start rolling and then the whole trailer could tip over. After an hour or more, he's finished the job and he's finished too. He's absolutely shattered. It's not just the one day's labour. It's the unending labour of a hundred days, a thousand days. He's grateful for the work, but it's killing him. Then he remembers the pills Stevie sold him in the pub a couple of nights ago. He doesn't know exactly what they are: 'Man, ye can gan forever on these' was how Stevie made his pitch. Amphetamines, Benzedrine, Mephedrone – who cares? As long as they sort him out.

They do something to him, that's for sure. Half an hour after taking them he feels less tired; but also a whole lot worse, as if something has changed inside him, or something outside has changed, but he's not sure what.

Maybe it's the pills, maybe not. As dusk approaches, his sense of unease grows. All his life Geordie has worked alone. He's used to being in the middle of nowhere. This *is* the middle of nowhere: a remote area of the forest between Kershope Rigg

and Blacklyne Common. Walkers and farmers rarely come here. There is no reason to: no grazing, no paths that go anywhere, nothing to see except trees. There's nobody here; not at this time of day. He has heard the barking of foxes, the alarm calls of birds and often he has heard the screams of buzzards overhead as they float sideways in the winds that never stop blowing across these Border hills.

Now all he hears is the silence, and it is getting on his nerves. When the trailer has been loaded and the huge stack of wooden poles secured, he climbs into the cab of the big Scania and turns the key in the ignition.

He knows that the pills have done something weird to him. He wishes he hadn't taken them, but it's too late for that. His heart is pounding much too fast and he can feel the sweat beading on his forehead. He flicks on the headlights as he enters the dark tunnel of trees, following the intricate and confusing maze of forest roads down into the valley of the North Tyne, to Leaplish and on down to the chipboard factory in Hexham to drop off his load. When he's done that he will drive to the village beside the Tyne where Mary and he live in their flat. There's something else getting into his head: something he thinks he has seen rather than heard.

He switches on some music to drown out these odd and unwelcome thoughts – not really thoughts, but flashes from somewhere arriving in his brain like radio signals. Then the huge truck meets blacktop road, and he pushes the accelerator to the floor. Headlamps on full beam, the trailer sways dangerously as he drives much too fast down the valley. Only when the lights of the first villages appear does he slow down a little. As he drives through them, images come to him: images of children. In many of the houses, lights glow from upstairs windows. He imagines that those lights are illuminating

bathrooms and bedrooms. He imagines children at their bath-time; children having stories read to them by their parents, sitting on the side of the bed, turning the pages in the gentle glow of a bedside lamp. He imagines the children turning over sleepily in bed and murmuring goodnight. He imagines – so clearly – the father and the mother smiling at each other as they close the door softly on the sleeping child. He imagines it; he remembers it.

Mary is watching television when he arrives home. She stands up as he comes through the door, but does not offer him a kiss or greet him in any way. Instead she puts the kettle on. She knows he won't eat straightaway. He is too tired to eat, almost too tired to speak. He accepts a mug of tea from her and asks how she is.

'All right.'

A little later, he stands up, as if uncertain what to do next. Mary asks: 'Will I get you something to eat?'

'No – I'll do myself a fry-up in the morning.'

She leaves the room. He hears her running the tap in the bathroom and then the door of her room shuts. It isn't really her bedroom. It used to be the nursery, where the boy slept. He disappeared just before Christmas, when most buildings in the street had fairy lights hanging over the door and Christmas trees visible through the windows. He disappeared while they were starting to wrap his Christmas presents, while Christmas carols played incessantly on the radio and Christmas jingles played over the public address systems in the supermarkets.

That was four months ago, and more. Mary hasn't changed anything. The toys are all still in the cupboards. The ceiling is still pasted with stars and crescent moons that glow a little in the dark when the lights are switched off. Mary moved in

there a few weeks after the boy went. She and Geordie haven't shared a bed since. They haven't shared much else either: not their thoughts, nor their worries. They have plenty of those, but they no longer talk about them.

It's one of those things. She doesn't particularly blame Geordie for what happened; that's to say, she blames him equally along with the rest of the human race.

An hour or two later, Geordie switches off the television. He has no idea what he has been watching. He goes to the bathroom and brushes his teeth. He goes to their bedroom and strips off to his boxer shorts and climbs into bed. He sleeps in the middle now; it's less lonely. After a few minutes he falls asleep, but it is not the dreamless sleep of the tired man. His hands twitch and he moans once or twice. Then he mutters to himself: '*Light in the forest. Light in the forest.*'

There is no one to hear him, and when he wakes in the morning he doesn't remember his dreams. There is no one beside him to ask how he slept, or nuzzle against him for a moment before he steps out of bed. He showers, then dresses laboriously, for the tiredness from the day before hasn't left him. He goes into the kitchen and puts on the kettle. He raps gently on Mary's door to see if she wants a cup of tea bringing in. There is no answer. They still love each other, he tells himself, although it's hard to say why, or how you would know, they see so little of one another these days. He cooks himself a good breakfast: two fried eggs, beans, tinned tomatoes, bacon, a mug of hot tea with two sugars. After he has eaten, he experiences a rush as the glucose and the fats surge into his bloodstream – an illusion of energy; an illusion of purpose. By the time he has climbed into the truck and started it up, that flicker has died down again and he already feels weary as he heads north, back towards the forest.

Two

Mary and Geordie have lost a child. Why should they think themselves anything special? Why should they feel entitled to grieve? It's so commonplace. Abusing and losing children is something the nation excels at. Look at the headlines in the newspapers most weeks: children are tortured as witches; they are tortured for recreational purposes; they are abandoned, abused, trafficked, exploited, or just lost. It's hard to believe how many simply disappear. Presumed runaways, presumed to have gone to live with a relation, presumed to be someone else's problem.

It's a profound philosophical question as to why we do this to our children. Some blame it on the decline of the family. Others bridle at this suggestion; what's so special about families? Why should marriage be the only valid framework within which to bring up a child? It's an interesting debate.

There's a benefit system in place that rewards the production of children with money, housing and other prizes. Children are produced and nobody knows quite what to do with them. They go on the streets. They disappear. Or their economic value is recognised by entrepreneurs who know that children can provide services that will earn their owners money.

There are nameless children on the streets of every big city in the country: un-persons without family or even nationality.

There are children by their thousands in care homes. Some of them encounter compassion or even love; some of them receive less attention than rescue dogs.

A few of them encounter other kinds of love: a twisted, touching, groping kind of love that is hard to distinguish from hatred.

Every now and then some fresh crime against children is reported in the newspapers and the debate leaves the rooms of policy-makers and special political advisers and think-tanks and sociologists, and acquires a brief flicker of urgency. People are interviewed on television and say things such as: 'It's the twenty-first century. And we still live in a society that can't protect its own children from harm.' The statistics are dusted down and trotted out: the tens of thousands of children who go missing every year; the sixty-five thousand children placed in care homes. And everyone knows that's the tip of the iceberg.

Then some especially gifted adviser whispers in the ear of the secretary of state. He whispers that this could become an issue for voters. Something needs to be done. There has to be an initiative.

This secretary of state is keen on initiatives. He senses his career is on an upward trajectory. Five years ago he was a back-bench MP, whose previous employment was as an actor in a long-running soap opera on television. Then his talent at histrionics resulted in him being plucked from obscurity and appointed as a parliamentary private secretary. He would never have dreamed, when he first stood for parliament, that one day he would be secretary of state for the Department of Children, Schools and Families. Now – who knows where he might end up? The voters want action? Using all his vast ministerial powers he proposes, as with the twitch of a magic wand,

a network of Regional Children's Commissioners. They will be known as 'Children's Czars'.

Something like this has been done before, but it's going to be different this time. That's what the secretary of state argues. In a major speech that receives wide coverage in the media, he talks about the importance of his department's role. He refers to the recent conviction of a perpetrator in a case that shocked the country, and asks for more resources for his department to support his initiative. These *new* children's czars will be individuals of the highest possible calibre, and paid a fortune. They will have undreamed-of powers and enormous budgets.

'The new children's czars will get rid of the culture of compliance within social services,' intones the secretary of state on a BBC morning chat show. He has forgotten that, in response to an earlier crisis, he himself introduced many of the new compliance requirements that are keeping social workers behind their desks; filling in risk assessments; training in epidemiology; or engaging in 'reflective practice' sessions.

'They will help get social workers back on the front line. They will set new intervention targets. They will cut through the red tape and make things happen! We will pilot this scheme and then, as soon as possible, we intend to roll it out nationally.'

It sounds good. A children's czar! And who will be the first to be chosen? Who is this kindly person, muffled in furs, travelling everywhere by sledge and rescuing children trapped in gingerbread houses?

It is not some benign autocrat who is appointed to run the pilot scheme, but Norman Stokoe.

Norman Stokoe, Children's Czar! Who would have thought that Norman could ever aspire to such a position? He started his working life in a North London Local Education Authority.

Then an opening appeared for an administrator in the Social Services department. It soon became apparent that Norman was a clever man. He always did his homework. He always turned up at meetings on time. He spoke well. He was considered to be sound. And it wasn't too long before he began to rise effortlessly through the great new industry of child protection.

Norman Stokoe, Children's Czar. You wouldn't get a job like that without knowing your business. And Norman does know it. He was involved in the second intergovernmental conference on Violence against Children. He is familiar with the UN Convention on Rights of the Child. He did sterling work for the Safeguarding Children review that was sponsored by Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Chief Inspectorate and other august bodies. He can reel off the annual statistics from the British Crime Survey: half a million children recorded as the victims of violent crimes in England and Wales; forty-three thousand the subject of child protection plans, thirteen thousand of them under four years old; twenty-one thousand children the victims of rape, gross indecency or incest; one in seven of those children under the age of ten; eight thousand violent attacks against children under the age of ten.

It is a problem on an industrial scale and it requires an industrial response. The UK leads the world – but whether in measuring the problem or solving it, it is harder to say. The UK has some of the most stringent codes of practice of any country regarding the exploitation of children in sweat factories in Thailand or Vietnam. It is sometimes less effective at preventing the abuse of children within its own shores. But successive governments have studied the problem. They may not have solved the problem; perhaps it is a problem nobody will ever solve. But they have certainly studied it.

Norman has spent many happy hours in the thickets of reports by commissions of inquiry, by charities, by government agencies both national and international. He knows his way around. He can quote the numbers. He can provide the references. He speaks the language: the special, anaesthetising language that is used to neutralise the stark truth of the figures. Norman is not shocked. He is not in favour of violence against children. He considers it – directly, and indirectly – a serious cost to the economy. The indirect cost is the hardest to quantify: all those children growing up – if they survive – to become damaged adults. It's a shame, Norman used to think, but all the same he is in some sense grateful for the industry – industry is definitely the right word – that provides him with a living. For every few thousand crimes there must be a report and there are a lot of reports produced every year. For each report to be produced, there must be meetings. Norman likes those meetings: he can shine, he knows his stuff, he drinks the coffee and he eats the complimentary biscuits.

He knows the child protection industry like few others. He's never put a foot wrong. He has worked for the Child Wellbeing Group, the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Group, the Child Protection Steering Group, and the Independent Safeguarding Authority.

Norman Stokoe is an obvious candidate to be the first regional children's commissioner. Checks reveal that he is squeaky clean. He went to a good church school and the right sort of university. He has never caused anyone a moment's trouble. He is a safe pair of hands. Nobody knows what he does, or has ever done. He is perfect.

In all the due diligence that is done on Norman, nobody comments on the fact that Norman isn't married, has no male

or female partner, and there is no recorded instance of him ever having actually met a child.

Of course he met children at school, when he himself was a child. He was a clever boy whose academic parents had taught him to believe that cleverness was everything, more important than good looks, more important than athletic prowess. He was not the most popular boy in his class. However, Norman knew he was the cleverest and therefore the most important boy in his year. His classmates made a point of never asking him to be on their team and rarely asked him to come home to tea with them. Perhaps it was that experience that turned him away from the idea of having children himself.

Who can say? But it is a fact that in all his years working in and around the social services, Norman has never been directly involved in an intervention. He's never tripped over a bicycle in the hall of some dingy flat. He's never encountered the smells and sights of some barely furnished living room, graced only by a huge television set, where a mother and father sit in semi-stupor, drinking Special Brew and rolling joints, while an unregarded and unwanted child sits in a corner in a nappy that should have been changed the day before.

It hasn't hindered his career so far. He is driven by ambition. He sees life as a ladder that clever people can climb and stupid people cannot. He evaluates his own worth as a function of his pay grade and the size of his office. When, after a number of interviews culminating in an expensive lunch in St James's Street, he is offered the job of Children's Czar, he accepts with gratitude. The salary is prodigious. He could afford to take the prime minister out to dinner rather more easily than the prime minister could afford to take him.

And so Norman's life begins to change. He sells his flat in North London and purchases another, larger and much

cheaper, in a market town near Newcastle-upon-Tyne. From there it is only half an hour to his smart new office in a complex of glass and steel by the shores of the River Tyne. Norman hires a removal firm to do the tedious work of packing and transporting his worldly goods, and drives north in his Honda Accord. As he drives, he contemplates his prospects with pleasure. He will be a shark in the fishpond of the North East. They won't have come across an operator of his calibre before. Norman knows, without having met any of his new colleagues for more than an instant, that he will run rings around them.

He smiles as he drives. He sits low in his seat, one hand on the steering wheel, listening to *The Food Programme*. From time to time, he plucks a wine gum from a bag and inserts it between his lips. He is not in uniform today. His twenty suits have gone ahead of him. Today he wears a (rather tight-fitting) pale-blue pullover and an open-necked pink shirt and cream-coloured trousers. He might be on his way to play golf somewhere, except that Norman doesn't play golf. He doesn't play golf; he doesn't play tennis; he only likes watching sport on TV.

It is early evening when his car approaches Newcastle. He turns on to the Western Bypass and the first thing he sees is a giant crucifix, an iron cross silhouetted against an orange sky. A crucifix a hundred feet high, spreading its arms over the motorway like a warning. Then he sees it is not a crucifix but a gigantic iron angel, unfurling its protective wings above the warehouses and factory units below. It is the enormous metal sculpture called 'The Angel Of The North'. Norman has arrived.

His new appointment doesn't quite turn out as Norman expected. He has forgotten what he should not have forgotten:

that nothing lasts for ever in these fast-changing times. This is a government of action. It wants progress in all directions. It wants change. It *loves* change. Only a matter of weeks after the announcement of Norman's new position, before his first salary cheque has even hit his bank account, new priorities are set for the government department for which he works. The enabling legislation that is required to implement the network of Children's Czars is put to one side for the moment, in order to free up parliamentary time to accommodate some other initiative. But Norman Stokoe has already been hired. He has already moved north. It is too late to reverse the decision to employ him, and he will no doubt be needed soon. So he is given a PA and the office he was promised and he settles down in his new leather chair behind his new desk to wait for the green light to begin his mission.

At first the inactivity does not bother him. He is used to the odd hiatus in his career, while the rest of the world catches up with his next promotion. But, after a while, he begins to wonder when word will come from London confirming it is all systems go.

The green light never comes. There has been a cabinet reshuffle and another secretary of state has been appointed to replace his predecessor, who promised so much. His old boss has been moved to the Home Office: a promotion. The new incumbent at the head of Norman's department has many things to think about and enormous problems to resolve. Children's czars were not his idea. He will get no credit for implementing someone else's initiative. It never occurs to him to worry about Norman Stokoe. So Norman is left high and dry: no department, no budget, no terms of reference, nobody reporting to him, nobody to report to.

Norman cannot believe he has been forgotten. It is not

conceivable they would pay him and not ask him to *do* anything. His new office is located close to the Tyne in an elegant, airy complex where once there was a dirty, unpleasant power station. In the vast atrium are works of art by a well-known and extremely highly paid Finnish sculptor: twisted metal shapes that look like a clutch of vultures glued to the wall. There is a coffee bar serving espresso and different kinds of latte. Outside his large and comfortable office is an antechamber where his PA sits. It is hard to know what she does all day, because Norman has nothing for her to do. Not yet.

Norman spends pleasant hours in his new office getting to know his neighbours, having lunch with future colleagues, and visiting local government offices to introduce himself. His time will come. Word will arrive from Whitehall. His day in the sun – his new lifetime in the sun – is about to start. Except that nothing happens.

Norman has been overlooked. In the new organisational structure of his department, his name is nowhere to be found. The administrative system to pay him is the only mechanism that has been established since his appointment. That ticks like a Swiss watch: his salary arrives monthly without delay. Norman's salary is a footnote to a footnote in an appendix attached to a vast document describing the operation of his department of state, and absolutely no one remembers that he still exists. Norman has business cards printed at his own expense, for which he files a claim. Still he waits. He is a patient man.

Three

Becky Thomas, nine years old and small for her age, goes out to play. It is eleven o'clock in the morning and Mum is sitting in the kitchen drinking vodka from a mug. Becky should be at school but isn't, because Mum can't remember the name of the school; she can't remember where it is; she can't be sure she even remembers the name of her daughter. But she knows how to deal with little crises of this sort. She calls out for her daughter. Becky comes into the kitchen, her long, fair hair hanging down her back, her blue eyes watching her mother with apprehension.

'Goo't an' play,' Mum commands. Her words are slurred, and Becky knows that outside is the best place to be for an hour or two, until Mum goes back to sleep. She would rather sit in her room and read, but now is not a good time to be hanging around the house. Becky goes out to play. It means stepping out of the back door, crossing a little alleyway and entering a small park garlanded with old plastic carrier bags and ambushed by dog faeces. But there is a wooden roundabout there, and Becky likes to play on it until it is safe to go back home.

This has been Becky's life for a couple of years now. There was Before, and there is Now. Before, they were a family. Mummy didn't drink then, at least not all day long. The house

was tidy and meals were regular and Becky, an only child, felt secure in her home, at the centre of the universe.

Now, they are not a family. There is her mother and there is Becky. Becky's no longer at the centre of the universe. She's on the edge of somebody else's universe, and it's not a good place to be. Her mother has gradually upgraded from the odd drink before lunch and several drinks in the evening, to a life where she has her first shot of vodka at breakfast. That is breakfast, as far as Becky's mum is concerned. And it goes on from there. Once the whole house was warm and safe and clean. Now the house is always cold, because there isn't the money to pay for the central heating. Becky's mum has her own internal central heating, and that doesn't leave anything over for Becky. The house isn't clean any more. It's filthy. It's never cleaned, unless Becky is allowed to have use of the vacuum cleaner and dustpan and brush when she comes home from school. But sometimes when she starts to tidy up around her mother, she's shouted at. Perhaps Becky's mum realises that she's the one who should be doing some of the housework. Perhaps it's a guilty conscience; or perhaps she just likes shouting.

Nowadays, if Becky's mum won't take her to school, she doesn't go to school. The streets around here are not always safe. Questions are asked at school to which Becky has no answers. Once or twice a social worker's been to call, but Becky's mum doesn't answer the door. Becky's probably on a care register somewhere, marked down for fostering. But nobody's got around to taking her away from her mother so far. Meanwhile, if Becky's mum tells her daughter to go out and play, then that's the best thing to do. It's by far the safest course of action.

She goes and stands on the wooden roundabout, one foot on the roundabout, one foot pushing at the concrete pad until

she has momentum and is whirling around and around. As the roundabout revolves, Becky thinks – but it is only her fancy – that she can hear the shouts and laughter of other children, as if she were in the school playground in the morning break, where she should be. She imagines her friends, jumping on and off the roundabout. She gives a quiet little smile. Becky is a quiet sort of girl. She knows she is on her own.

At first, nobody stops to talk to her while she plays. At first, nobody asks her what a little girl like her is doing, playing in the streets of the small town where she lives, when she should be at school. Afterwards, nobody can remember seeing her there, except one old lady driving to the shops on her mobility scooter. She says later that she remembers seeing 'A little girl playing on the roundabout. She looked lonely, poor little dear.' When the old lady comes back from shopping at the Co-op about half an hour later, she notices that the little girl is no longer there, and assumes she must have gone back home.

The old lady isn't the only one in the street that morning. It has other inhabitants. They are not all drunk, or asleep. They are inside their houses cleaning; or hanging out the washing on lines strung across backyards; or standing at the fence in front gardens talking to their neighbours. A few of them have jobs and have gone to work. None of them notices little Becky Thomas. Maybe fifty cars and vans go up and down the street that morning. The post never comes until half past ten, so the postman should have seen her. Parcelforce makes a delivery to number fourteen. The driver doesn't remember seeing Becky. Others go about their business as they do every day, but nobody notices Becky Thomas, and nobody talks to her.

Except that somebody sees her. Somebody, after all, does stop and talk to the lonely little girl. There are no eyewitness

accounts to colour in the details of the person who stops and talks to Becky. Nobody can say that he or she was wearing a tracksuit, or a hooded top, or a grey suit. The unknown person has no identifying features or shape or personal characteristics with which we can tag him, or her. But whoever it is, there's speculation it must have been somebody familiar to Becky because she's been trained at school, if not at home, never to talk to strangers. It would have been easy, if she had been scared, for her to run back across the alleyway to the relative safety of her home. So the assumption is that she wasn't scared. Not at first.

'Are you happy playing here all on your own?' this person might have enquired.

'Oh, I am,' Becky might have replied, not wanting to talk to the familiar person. She knows him or her, she's seen him or her around before and she doesn't want to be rude either. She has found that some grown-ups hit children who are rude to them.

'Don't you get bored?' the familiar person asks.

'No, I like being on my own,' answers Becky. And she does. She recognises her interlocutor, and in a way she even likes him or her. But why's he or she here now, all alone, without the familiar van? There's something going on here. Something is not right. It is easy to imagine that, at this point, Becky is beginning to wish the familiar person would go away and leave her alone. It isn't normal for someone to appear out of nowhere in the alleyway next to the playground. It isn't normal for someone to get out of a car and come and talk to her. CCTV pictures show all the regular vans and buses that go down that street; they also show a Mitsubishi Shogun with tinted windows in the area that morning. It is one of two or three vehicles the police would like to trace in order to eliminate it from

their enquiries, but the number plate is spattered with mud and unreadable.

'Would you like to come for a ride in my car?' asks the familiar person. Presumably Becky says no and presumably by then she's been grabbed and, before you know it, Becky is gone, her companion is gone and the car (that might or might not be a Mitsubishi Shogun with tinted windows) is also gone. Becky Thomas has gone missing.

When Becky's mum wakes at about three o'clock that afternoon, with a dry taste in her mouth and the television turned up too loud, she isn't thinking of Becky. Then she sees the clock on the mantelpiece and it tells her it is nearly time to go to the school gates and collect her daughter. She wonders if she can bring herself to stand up, to straighten herself out so that she looks a little less like an old drunk who has just woken up, and make the effort to walk the half mile to the school gates. Then she remembers that she didn't take Becky to school that morning. So that's OK, then. Becky's mum is very slow to realise that, no, that is not OK. It is very far from OK, because Becky is not in the house. She is not in the park. Becky Thomas isn't anywhere.

And, after a while, Becky's mum realises, with a sick feeling that is worse than any hangover, that while she's been asleep her little girl has disappeared. With a great effort she manages to find her way to a neighbour's house, where there is a phone that is still connected, and she calls the police.

The police send a car, and two officers interview Becky's mum. They can't get a lot of sense out of her. They make a few house-to-house enquiries and get nowhere. It isn't until late evening that a formal search gets underway. These things take time to organise. It's not like on TV. There aren't many spare

bodies at the local nick. Men have to be drafted in and a search plan has to be agreed. It doesn't make any difference. Becky's far away now.

The local papers make a fuss, and the disappearance of Becky Thomas even makes the national news, for about two days. But she is only one little girl. Her single mother appears on BBC's *Look North* at a press conference a few days later. She is not sober. It is not an edifying spectacle. When she's given her moment to speak to Becky's abductor, she can't find the words or, if she finds them, she can't articulate them. She looks like an old scarecrow with her creased-up, red face.

'My Becky,' she manages to say. 'Come back to me.' She wants to say to somebody out there: 'Bring her back to me', but she can't, she just makes swallowing and gulping noises. It is obvious by now that swallowing and gulping are what she does best. The senior policeman sitting beside her touches her arm and takes over. 'If someone took Becky away without her mother's knowledge or permission, that person may have friends, or family. If anyone you know has been behaving oddly recently, or you think might in any way know something about this missing little girl, please contact us.'

A telephone number comes up on the screen. But the person who took Becky doesn't have friends and no longer has family. The person who took Becky doesn't watch television and doesn't need to. He or she has other interests.

The private view of the police is that Becky's a runaway. Having floated the theory that some unknown person may have stopped and talked to Becky and then grabbed her, the more they see of Becky's mum, the more they're inclined to discount the possibility of abduction. 'With a mother like that,' says a DI, 'who can blame the poor little thing? She'll be in

Newcastle somewhere. Or even London.' Officially, they say the case is still open. Officially, they say: 'We haven't ruled anything in and we haven't ruled anything out.'

A missing child – you'd think the press would lap up the story, have a field day with it. But in this case there's too much ambiguity: is she missing or did she, as the police leak privately to journalists over a pint, 'do a runner'. The story starts to die. One or two more imaginative journalists try to think of a new angle. One of them discovers that there is a new arrival in the North East, a new addition to the panoply of regional social services: a children's czar. Surely he will have something to say about all this?

When the journalist rings, the children's czar is sitting at his desk, drinking a latte macchiato, with a sprinkling of chocolate and whipped cream. The drink has left a cream and chocolate moustache on his upper lip. He has a busy day ahead. No news from Whitehall, but meanwhile the local bureaucracy has become aware that Norman is a spare senior official with an impressive title. He receives lots of invitations: to exhibitions, conferences, workshops, break-out sessions – the kind of activities that fill the lives of so many these days.

This afternoon he is going to inspect a new art installation, a series of giant blue Perspex cubes which will be launched into the River Tyne and will float downstream. They have Wi-Fi on board and you can call them on your mobile as they float past and they can tell you things … recipes for salmon … information on water voles … information on canoe festivals. It is an important installation symbolizing … Well, it's a symbol of something, that's for sure, and Norman has been invited to attend the launch ceremony. Then this evening he is attending … But then the phone rings, breaking into Norman's review of the day ahead.

He wipes the moustache of fake cream and chocolate from his upper lip so that it won't smear the mouthpiece. 'Norman Stokoe speaking,' he tells the phone. The journalist introduces himself and asks for a comment on the case of missing Becky Thomas. Norman Stokoe can't think what the journalist is talking about.

'You know, the little girl that went missing last week,' prompts the reporter.

'Yes, of course, but I don't think I should comment while the investigation is ongoing,' says Norman. He has remembered now, he saw something about it in the papers.

'But as children's czar, you must have an interest in the case?'

'My job is not to hinder police investigations by unnecessary speculation,' says the children's czar. He hangs up a moment later and makes a note to himself to find out about Becky Thomas. You can't be too careful. Be prepared, that's Norman's motto.

He rings for his PA. She is one of a pool of ladies dedicated to making the lives of the workers in these government offices a little less stressful. She makes sure Norman doesn't have to bother with arrangements such as booking theatre tickets, arranging taxis or submitting expense claims. Even with all these demands on her time, she is surprised when the phone rings. It doesn't happen often. She puts down her copy of *Grazia* and answers: 'Yes, Mr Stokoe?'

'I want you to take a letter. Could you come through to my office?'

He dictates the letter. It is to be addressed to the Head of Human Resources in his department in London. After a short preamble, he says:

> I would be most grateful if you could now forward to me, in writing, a copy of my Terms of Reference, as instructed by the secretary of state. There is, as a result of a recent missing child case, a growing interest in this region in the role of the new children's czar. It is important that in responding to enquiries from other government departments and, indeed, the press, that I speak with the knowledge that I have the full backing of the department and am in a position to clarify the precise nature of my role and the powers attached to it.

He hesitates before signing the letter when it is brought in to him. It is very *committing*, signing a letter like this. He hopes nobody will construe it as criticism. He is conscious that he has a generous salary and a comfortable office. All the same, he needs a letter like this on file just to show – if anyone ever asks – that he is keen to get on with his job. He has rolled up his sleeves and he is anxious to get on with it. The letter will be clear evidence that he is straining at the leash, not idling his time away at the taxpayers' expense.

It is some days before a reply arrives and, when it does, it is not helpful. Norman reads the letter. The principal private secretary has a terser literary style than Norman. He writes:

> Unfortunately the enabling legislation for the proposed new network of regional children's commissioners was deprioritised at short notice to enable other legislation to get into the Statute Book. Meanwhile, a select committee is considering the costs and potential long-term outcomes of the so-called 'Children's Czars' network. The committee is expected to report to Parliament next summer, in about fifteen months' time.

Norman writes 'Not helpful' in thick black ink across the letter and files it. At any rate, he can relax. He has asked, and he has received a reply. He can do no more. It is springtime now, and the leaves are budding on the trees. Norman decides to go for a walk along the river embankment in the sunshine and then find a nice little restaurant for a spot of lunch. He rings his PA and says: 'I'm going out for a meeting. I'll be back about two-thirty.'

'Oh, Mr Stokoe, I was just about to call you. A lady is asking to see you.'