

Wormfood

Tom Foolery discovered that it didn't take much to snag the attention of children. Candies and kittens and fluffy ducklings worked well for the younger ones, and for a lot of the older kids too, though there were always those for whom he had to make a little extra effort. A pangolin say, or a baby Komodo dragon; perhaps a timber wolf, or an elk, and for those who were immune to such delights he could always rustle up a Nando's, though truth be told, resorting to such measures depressed him a little.

He began with the offspring of the drug-hazed and alcohol-addled. By the time they realised their children were gone, they couldn't remember the last time they'd seen them. Could have been Wednesday, but Wednesdays ran into Thursdays which were easily confused with Sundays.

There was some wailing and moaning, but these were a people no-one listened to and as they retreated to the numb, even they themselves wondered if they'd ever had babies or only dreamed them. Occasionally, feeling the pain of loss but unsure of what had been taken from them, they mewled piteously at the world, but no-one heard, the authorities least of all.

When he'd relieved the junkies and jakeys of their parental responsibilities, Tom began on the next layer; those struggling for breath under the weight of debt, want, and need. He took a child here, a child there, and then a few more. The loss was noted, voices raised, but these were a people used to being ignored and were therefore not surprised when no-one listened. It was only as he worked his way up the food chain to those more used to being heeded that serious concerns were raised.

Someone is taking our children.

The P-word was uttered, and rumours spread like an infection. The children had been taken by a paedophile, no – a gang of paedophiles. They'd been snatched to order, picked from a catalogue designed for perverts and deviants. There was an online outgush, while tears were shed and sad-face mode was adopted for the benefit of the mainstream media. The authorities were notified, reports duly filed and everyone engaged until a famous actor's face-lift collapsed during a live TV interview and the world was distracted by the horror of his eye sliding towards his chin.

Though Tom Foolery knew that a paedophile did indeed live in every neighbourhood, he was not one of one of them. Nor did he take the children. Not in the sense *they* meant it. All he did was get their attention and once it was his, it was not lock and key, nor chains and ropes and fear that bound them to him, but a desire to listen to what he had to say and to be heard by him in return.

To begin with, Tom and the children lived in a warren of long-forgotten underground bunkers but as their numbers grew, they occupied disused underground stations, abandoned amusement parks and redundant factories. These Tom enjoyed, but the residence that gave him most pleasure was an entire, modern apartment block in the heart of the capital. Bought by an oligarch for tax purposes, not a single flat had ever been lived in, at least not until Tom Foolery's followers moved in via the underground carpark and service elevators.

Here, we hide in plain sight.

Contrary to speculation, the children were not held captive, nor had they retreated from the world. In fact, they ventured out frequently, melting into the shadows surrounding the adults they'd forsaken, listening silently as trees wept and watching as nematodes curled up and died.

When the worms die, Tom told them, everything else follows.

The children whispered what they knew around playgrounds, shopping centres, and schools and the new friends they made joined them willingly. Finally, so many children disappeared that the story could no longer be quelled, not even by a royal sex scandal. The hashtag bestowed to the phenomenon out-trended every other.

Tom Foolery snorted. *#PiedPiper? Oh please - he was an amateur at best.*

A fever of posturing, victim-blaming, virtue-signalling, grandstanding, goading, speculation and conspiracy theories erupted on medias social and mainstream, but none of it could stop the haemorrhaging of children from their homes. Parents judged other parents until it happened to them. Schools were forced to close, their teachers made redundant. Questions were raised at government level, but when it came to offering solutions, the authorities had none.

The energy it took to operate at screaming headline level could not be sustained. It was inevitable that the outrage would dissipate and as it did, it was replaced by a pall of dismal apathy. A world without children was a world without hope. Only when the earth was swaddled entirely in gloom did Tom make his final announcement.

It's time.

The children sallied forth from their arcades, bunkers, subways and skylofts. They returned to their homes, allowing themselves to be enveloped in the arms of their parents, carers, guardians, aunties, uncles and neighbours.

As though they had rehearsed it, the adults all followed the same script. At first, relief was expressed along with declarations of love, but even as the first blush of welcoming warmth faded, a libretto of questions and accusations began.

Where have you been? Why did you go? Who took you? What happened to you? Did you put up a fight? Did they... do things to you? We've been worried sick. You've put your mother and me through hell. Well – say something!

Their final words were still moist on their lips as they gasped their last.

Within seventeen hours of the children's reappearance, the adults were gone. Stabbed, bludgeoned, poisoned, and drowned. Suffocated, garrotted, electrocuted, and crushed. Strangled, hanged, shot, and overdosed. Whatever the method, no-one escaped. They were wormfood all.

Enough of your tomfoolery, the children said. It's time to start over.