



LUKE EVISON

*THE STRANGE  
DISAPPEARANCE OF*  
**SHANNON  
MATTHEWS**



LUKE EVISON

*THE STRANGE  
DISAPPEARANCE OF*  
**SHANNON  
MATTHEWS**

Luke Evison

# **The Strange Disappearance of Shannon Matthews**

BookRix GmbH & Co. KG  
80331 Munich

▪

© 2021 Luke Evison

## **Contents**

Preface

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

References

Photo Credits

## **Preface**

The disappearance of Shannon Matthews in Dewsbury in 2008 is a true crime case that people still seem to be fascinated by. Rarely a year goes past without a new television documentary on the case or a battery of tabloid updates concerning the (usually but not always) mundane activities of the disgraced Karen Matthews. The reason why the Shannon Matthews case is so famous is that it didn't end in the way people expected. The missing child was found alive and there was an outrageous twist when it became apparent that the mother was involved and it had all been a strange sort of hoax.

With the gift of hindsight the twist in the Shannon Matthews case doesn't seem quite so outrageous. A number of people close to Karen Matthews during the search for Shannon couldn't fail to notice that her behaviour was very odd at times given the harrowing circumstances. Karen's daughter was missing and yet in her private moments, away from the cameras and reporters, Karen Matthews acted like a person without a care in the world. While more than one person began to experience a sense that there was something strange about Karen Matthews and this case the actual truth still came as a surprise to them.

It is surprising how few examples there are in true crime of anything like the Shannon Matthews case. This hoax was exceptionally rare. The fact that there is nothing quite like the Shannon Matthews case was a motivating factor in writing this book and one explanation for why it has been enduringly compelling to so many. The fact that the hoax had no chance of success merely adds another layer of morbid fascination. Karen Matthews was like a mirror

version of Forrest Gump. She was an ordinary bewildered figure to whom incredible things happened. In Karen's case though those things were pretty grim and terrible and all of her own making.

The eclectic supporting cast in this drama included the eccentric Michael Donovan (without whom none of this could have happened), Karen's stone faced young boyfriend Craig Meehan, and Karen's friend and neighbour Julie Bushby - who rallied the community to search for Shannon only to discover in the end that Karen had been duping them all. What I've tried to do in this book is put the chronology of the case in the right sequence and introduce these characters as they impacted the case. This book will interweave the events on Dewsbury Moor and at Lidgate Gardens in parallel and hopefully present a clearer picture of the case as it unfolded.

While much has been written about this case and it has been the subject of many television documentaries (and even a prestige BBC drama) I hope there will still be things in this book that will be new to most people. The list of sources used in the research for this book can be found after the end of the final chapter.

## Chapter 1

If anyone had to draft a list of the greatest criminal masterminds in history it's probably safe to say that Karen Matthews would not feature in any such discussion. Karen Matthews was a woman who could barely read - let alone stage an elaborate criminal hoax capable of duping the police, the media, relatives, and most of her friends. And yet Karen Matthews, for a limited window at least, seemed to do all of these things surprisingly well. The only problem was that the hoax was doomed right from the start.

The disappearance of Shannon Matthews was a hoax with no apparent endgame. It was a plan that made no sense whatsoever. The plan seemed to function as a perfect insight into the delusional and childlike minds who had apparently conceived it. Shannon's disappearance was a muddle so confusing that to this day the full picture of what really happened has never quite been fully slotted into place. There still remain a few stray jigsaw pieces yet to take their place in the puzzle.

Karen Matthews was a simple and uncomplicated woman who plainly had what you might describe as a very arduous relationship with harsh reality. This is a malady we all suffer from in some form. Reality is no picnic. It is often a disappointing place to live. However, most of us are pragmatic enough to realise that that we must, whether we like it or not, plant our feet firmly in reality and somehow make the best of it. At least for most of the time. Karen Matthews found it increasingly difficult in the end though to keep so much as a fingernail in the real world. Karen fell so far down the rabbit hole of delusion and fantasy she seemed to think that pretending her daughter Shannon had gone

missing would be a passport to no questions asked tabloid reward riches and a new career as a Jade Goody style celebrity.

The possibility that her ruse might backfire and land her in prison does not appear to have factored too highly in Karen's thoughts. In such a scenario (and this scenario inevitably unfolded once the hoax dramatically fell apart in the sad fashion that it was surely always destined to do so) Karen Matthews would be exposed as a neglectful mother who had put her young confused daughter through an unnecessary and strange ordeal. She would be absolutely despised. Karen would also be unmasked as someone who had completely betrayed the trust and kindness of her friends - the same friends who rallied around and did all they could to help find Shannon when she was thought to be missing.

None of these grave and serious risks seemed to weigh heavily in the mind of Karen Matthews. It wasn't that Karen didn't care about any of these things. She simply lacked the ability to think deeply about the possible consequences of her actions. Karen Matthews was naive in the extreme and hopelessly detached from reality. She was ultimately the architect of her own downfall and paid a heavy price for her inexplicable actions. To this day Karen Matthews is still paying a price for the bizarre events that happened in Dewsbury a long time ago. Karen's childlike personality might partially explain her actions but it cannot condone them.

This sorry stranger than fiction tale all began on Tuesday the 19th of February, 2008. The day for nine-year old Shannon Matthews began much like any other day. She woke up early, had breakfast, and left for Westmoor Junior School at around eight. That afternoon her class was

scheduled to have a swimming lesson at the local leisure centre so Shannon had an exciting day in store. Shannon stood not much more than four feet tall and had freckles and blue eyes. She was a popular child with other kids and liked by all the parents in the area. Shannon was a shy and creative child. One of her favourite things to do was use the art and painting programme on her computer.

Shannon lived on Dewsbury Moor in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire. The estate where she lived was known as the Moorside. The family lived in a small red brick council house with three bedrooms. The Moorside was a strange place in that it felt tatty and bleak up close but if one craned up even slightly it was nestled in a beautiful area of wide open spaces and green. Years ago many people in Dewsbury used to work in the busy textile mills but the old industries were all but gone now. Though the estate had a bad reputation most of the people there were thoroughly decent and a long way from the working class caricatures the media sometimes portrayed them as.

Shannon's mother was the grumpy looking red-haired 32 year-old Karen Matthews. Karen was a rather dumpy woman with a fondness for parka jackets. She would later say that the last time she saw Shannon that morning Shannon had shouted 'love you!' as she left through the front door. There were later accounts though that Shannon and Karen argued that morning and Karen angrily told her not to come back. Karen's account of that morning was naturally very rose tinted purely for the benefit of the police. As for stories of a blazing row and slamming doors, well, you would have to have been inside the house that morning at number 24 Moorside Road to know. The real truth was most likely more mundane. A fairly ordinary morning like most others.

Karen Matthews left school at sixteen and eventually had seven children with five different fathers. She came from a big family herself and had several siblings. Karen would sometimes get confused about how many children she actually had in the end - much to the exasperation of relatives. "When Shannon first went missing, Karen told everyone that she had six children," said Karen's sister Julie Poskitt. "It took her days to remember she had seven. I remember screaming at the telly, because even though I'm not their mother, I knew she had seven!" Shannon and one of her brothers had the same father and for this reason Karen always called them the 'twins' - even though they weren't twins at all. Karen Matthews was, to put it mildly, a woman who was easily confused by the simplest of things.

Apart from a brief cleaning job in her teens Karen had never worked. She became largely estranged from her parents at a very young age and spent some time in care. Karen was only a teenager when she left home. Karen would later say that she had suffered some sexual abuse as a child (not by her parents - they were decent people) and some of her friends think that Karen's bizarre troubles in 2008 were a partial by-product of being a damaged person who had never received much genuine love from the world. Karen moved back in with her parents when she had her first children but the relationship was always rocky and destined for more trouble down the line. When Shannon went 'missing' it didn't take long for the media to learn that Karen and her parents were not even on speaking terms.

Some of Karen's former partners were inevitably tracked down by the media when Karen Matthews became infamous. None of them had anything nice to say about her at all. They all (rather predictably) suggested Karen liked to get pregnant because she saw that as a means to obtain more benefit money from the dole office. A couple who lived

door to Karen in the years before she moved to the Moorside said that Karen tended to view her children purely as bargaining chips. While this was not entirely true (even the social services said that Karen, for all her faults, had a bond with her children), Karen was clearly a selfish woman who sometimes put her own needs above those of her children.

Shannon's father was a 29 year-old man named Leon Rose who lived in Huddersfield. Shannon used to go and stay with Mr Rose quite frequently in the past but when relations between Karen and Rose became tense this contact became less common. Given a choice, Shannon would rather have been living with her father and his girlfriend Tracey Goldsmith in Huddersfield than on Moorside Road with her mother. As the police would discover, Shannon had written of this desire in her bedroom. Karen had two children with Leon Rose and the other child (Shannon's older brother) lived with Mr Rose in Huddersfield. It is believed that Karen Matthews and Leon Rose split up before Shannon was born.

Also living at Shannon's house on the Moorside was Karen's boyfriend - a 22 year-man named Craig Meehan. Meehan worked at the local Morrisons supermarket on the fish counter. Craig Meehan had always assumed he was the father of Karen's youngest child but police DNA tests taken during the search for Shannon revealed that he wasn't. Though he didn't know it yet, the unassuming tabula rasa that was Craig Meehan would soon be a magnet for all the tabloid red tops in the land. With Shannon's brothers and sisters in the house (four of Karen's seven children lived with her), space was at a premium and the Matthews family lived in modest circumstances.

While the inside of the house was somewhat scruffy and threadbare it was somehow the front and back yard which gave the worst impression. There was simply a patch of unruly bumpy sloped grass on either side. No one had made any attempt to put a personal or homely touch by planting anything of note or even just sticking a few plant pots here and there. There were no bushes and not even a hedge. It all made the house look bleak and lonely and a place that nature was somehow turning its back on. Creating this strange impression was no mean feat because the Moorside was very rural as far as council estates go. The surrounding views were far from unattractive or urban.

When she became infamously well known and the media were desperate for any and all Karen Matthews stories, former neighbours of Karen at places she lived prior to the Moorside would claim that she was a terrible mother and had music playing and people coming and going from her house at all hours. Some of these neighbours said that Shannon often seemed in need of a bath and clean clothes. Karen's sister Julie would later say that Karen would sometimes wrap her kids in carrier bags to save money on nappies. Julie thought that Karen was an awful mother. There were many stories of this nature when Karen Matthews became famous. The most consistent charge against Karen was that she was a very selfish and immature person. These are qualities unlikely to ever win you any parent of the year awards.

At the start of 2008 though, Karen seemed to be reasonably well liked on the Moorside estate. She had actually made some good friends. The fact that Craig Meehan did his share of work around the house, helped look after the children, and brought in a monthly wage packet also seemed - from the outside at least - to provide some basic stability to Karen's life. Unknown to Karen's friends

and relatives though her life was about to become anything but stable thanks to a most baffling crime case of deception. This was the last time that the life of Karen Matthews would ever be remotely normal again. She might have seemed mildly content to her friends but Karen was far from happy. She was tired of Craig Meehan and tired of having no money. Karen's desire to leave Craig Meehan and her desire for money would somehow coalesce into a bizarre and baffling sequence of events.

Just after three in the afternoon, Shannon Matthews was dropped off back at her school by bus after the swimming trip to the leisure centre. Shannon, as on any other day, now had to walk home to Moorside Road. This was a walk that usually took her about twenty minutes. Shannon's friend Megan Aldridge thought it was strange though that Shannon's brother was not waiting outside of the school gates for her when they got back from swimming. Shannon's mother usually made sure her brother was there to walk home with her but for some reason this hadn't been arranged that day.

Chloe West, who was another of Shannon's best friends, said that when the bus dropped them back at the school after the swimming trip, Shannon seemed to head for home in a different direction than her usual route. It was all very out of character for Shannon to walk home on her own and go in this direction. Megan Aldridge said she and Shannon sometimes used to get bullied at school. This was one of the reasons why they had developed such a close bond. Shannon was described by her teacher as a quiet girl. She was friendly and not very streetwise. Shannon never went out that much compared to other children (though she had a few secret places in the surrounding countryside she would go to when she wanted some peace and quiet). Most of her friends would often only see her at school.

While she was walking home alone after the swimming lesson, a silver Peugeot car pulled up alongside Shannon and the man inside told her to get in. The car belonged to a 39 year-old man named Michael Donovan. Michael Donovan must have been the oldest 39 year-old in the world. He had no teeth and could have easily passed for a pensioner. Donovan was the uncle of Craig Meehan and lived a mile away in Batley Carr. The police believe that Donovan might have picked up Shannon by the school although Michael Donovan later claimed he picked her up nearer the Moorside estate. One would have thought that if Donovan had picked up Shannon right by the school then someone would have seen her get into his car.

Shannon - much to the frustration of the police who had to investigate her disappearance - seemed to completely vanish with no verifiable sightings so one would presume that Donovan picked her up in a fairly quiet spot. Shannon was perfectly happy to get in the car that afternoon. She had met Michael Donovan before and got on well with him. Shannon may have presumed that maybe her mother or perhaps even Craig Meehan had asked Donovan to give her a lift. It is possible that Shannon thought that Donovan had been on his way to see relatives on the Moorside and just happened to chance upon her walking home so thought he would take her the rest of the way. Donovan had very different plans to that though. The Moorside was the last place he wanted to go.

Michael Donovan was a seriously strange man. His real name was Paul Drake. He had changed his name to Michael Donovan in tribute to the character played by Marc Singer in the early eighties science fiction television miniseries V. V was about reptilian aliens (though they look like lizards these aliens have craftily disguised themselves as humans)

who attempt a covert takeover of Earth. Michael Donovan was one of the main leaders of the human resistance against these pesky lizard invaders. The show obviously left a big impression on the former Paul Drake.

One of Drake's brothers was named Michael and complained when he heard of the planned name change (he felt, not unreasonably, that having two Michaels in the family was needlessly confusing and perhaps even a mild threat to his own sense of identity) but his protests fell on deaf ears and so Paul Drake became Michael Donovan thereafter.

Donovan was one of nine children. He attended a school for those with learning difficulties and left when he was sixteen. As a youth he was involved in incidents of arson and theft. He had a battery of jobs as an adult, including a spell as a delivery driver, and then married a woman named Susan Bird.

At the time of his marriage, Donovan was receiving psychiatric treatment. The marriage produced two daughters but was not destined to endure for very long. Bird and Donovan quickly grew to despise one another. She claimed he was addicted to painkillers and was erratic and violent. Donovan in turn said his wife was a liar and that SHE was the erratic and violent one. Michael Donovan somehow ended up with custody of their children after the marriage dissolved but soon after suffered a bad car crash which left him with serious head injuries. Since then he had lived on disability benefits and no longer worked.

Michael Donovan was not mentally equipped to look after two small children on his own and the authorities soon began to express concern at his situation. The children were eventually taken into care but Donovan then secretly picked

up one of his daughters from school and drove her to Blackpool. Two days later he was arrested in a Blackpool bed and breakfast where he'd been trying to hide his daughter. This incident had occurred fifteen months before that fateful day when he picked up Shannon Matthews in his car. Donovan was an emaciated looking man with short brown hair that was combed forward into a pudding bowl fringe. His most arresting features were his huge bug eyes - which made him seem to be in a permanent state of shock and bewilderment.

Michael Donovan was certainly no stranger to Shannon Matthews. He was almost (but not quite) even a sort of relative. Though not related by blood, Shannon thought of him as an uncle. Six weeks previously, after the funeral of Craig Meehan's father, Shannon had been seen by other relatives sitting on Michael Donovan's knee at the family gathering. This fact, when it came to light, would completely torpedo the claims by Karen Matthews that she didn't know Michael Donovan from Adam and would never trust him with Shannon. Michael Donovan was considered to be an odd and rather introverted man by many (if not quite all) of his neighbours and his relatives largely shared this view.

Shannon got in the car with Michael Donovan after he stopped. He told Shannon that she had to stay with him for a short time and her mother and siblings would join them soon. Shannon must have been very confused by this but she didn't really question it. They then made the short drive to the second floor flat at Lidgate Gardens where Michael Donovan lived. Lidgate Gardens was formed of three parallel blocks of maisonettes. This was a threadbare flat but it was no worse than the spartan council house that Shannon called home. It later came to light that Karen Matthews had been seen by a neighbour of Donovan visiting Lidgate Gardens a few weeks previously. This eyewitness was very

damaging to Karen because she told the police more than once that she had no idea where Michael Donovan lived.

When she got in the car, Michael Donovan told Shannon they could go to the local fair later as a treat. This trip did to the fair did not transpire though. Donovan later told Shannon that the thick winter fog meant the fair had been cancelled. While Donovan was lying about any proposed visit the fair (it was simply a means to relax Shannon) he wasn't lying about the fog that night. A thick winter mist engulfed Dewsbury and made it look like a Hammer Horror fog machine had gone berserk. While the nine year-old Shannon must have been rather confused by all of this she clearly trusted Michael Donovan and went along with his instructions.

The origin of this unusual state of affairs was an agreement between Karen Matthews and Donovan some weeks before. Karen had told Michael Donovan to look after Shannon for a while but keep it a secret and not let anyone know she was with him. Michael Donovan hadn't just driven to Dewsbury Moor out of the blue and then randomly noticed Shannon walking home. He was following instructions given to him by Karen Matthews. Donovan later claimed he was a very reluctant participant in all of this but was bullied into it.

The motivation of Karen Matthews was not as clear as it is sometimes portrayed in the media and retrospectives of this peculiar case. She seemed to begin with a vague idea of getting away from her boyfriend Craig Meehan. Donovan offered a way to do that because he said to Karen she could stay at his flat temporarily if she needed somewhere to live. Karen would actually cite this as what happened more than once to the police and even friends but then change her

story several more times - much to the dismay of the baffled detectives who had to question her.

In one of her versions of events, Karen said she planned to leave Craig Meehan but then Meehan got suspicious and Shannon somehow ended up trapped at Donovan's house before Karen had a chance to get herself or the other kids there. Karen then embellished this by saying she didn't know where Donovan lived. She would then embellish it further by saying she didn't even know Shannon was with Michael Donovan. Karen Matthews did this a lot when she was in police custody. Karen would tell lie after lie until her stories all contradicted one another and she had no idea what she was even saying anymore.

There was plenty evidence though to suggest that money was the main motivation of Karen Matthews in this curious case. Karen believed that if Shannon went missing then a reward fund would be activated by tabloids and donations - maybe even celebrities. The grand plan of Karen Matthew was that Shannon would safely live with Michael Donovan in complete secrecy until such time as the reward fund for this missing child was established and reached a sufficiently lucrative value. When this happened, Michael Donovan was then supposed to take Shannon to the police station and claim that he had found her in Dewsbury Market. The reward money would then be handed over to Donovan and he would split the windfall with Karen Matthews.

You didn't need to be Lieutenant Columbo to spot some obvious problems with this plan. What was Shannon going to say when she was inevitably asked by the police where she'd been living and who had been feeding her? Shannon would surely just say that she'd been with 'Uncle Mick' and the entire plan would be blown out of the water in an instant. That was far from the only problem with the hoax.