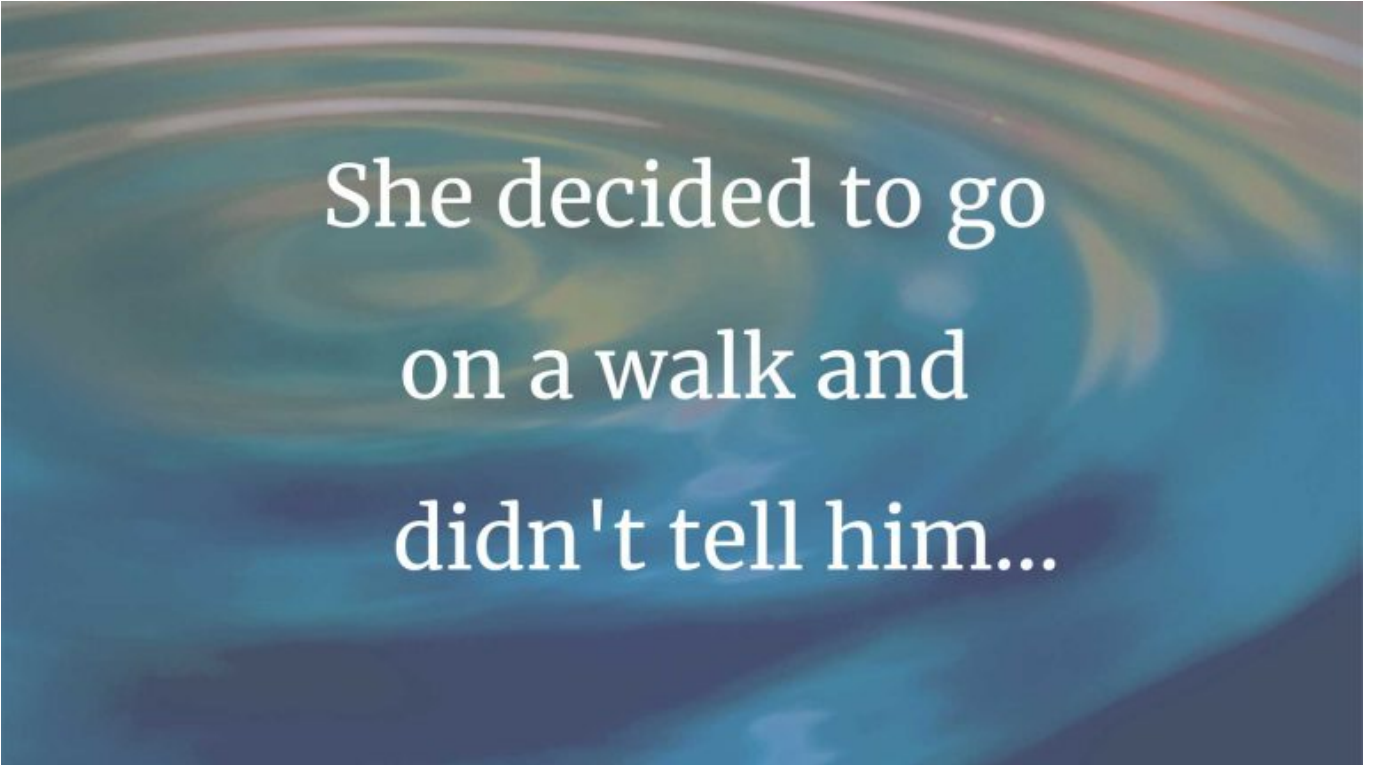


Missing

Category: Stories

written by Pascale Waschnig | May 9, 2025



She decided to go
on a walk and
didn't tell him...

I sit on the cold chair, looking at the floor.

"Yes, I know I'm depressed," I say, then pause.

"It's just that my mum went missing seven years ago, and she was never found."

Another pause, my words falling away, my eyes lowering.

"Since then, I've never been the same," I say. "It's hard; it still is."

"I am sorry," says Dr. Camden, a tall, thin, middle-aged man, composed, exuding quiet sophistication. This is the third time I'm seeing him.

"Tell me more about it. What happened?"

"Oh, she had Alzheimer's," I say. "My dad had given her magazine recipes to copy, to occupy her in the house while he was doing his garden; she loved cooking, you see. She decided to go on a walk and didn't tell him. When he went to check on her, she was gone. He thought he could find her."

Another long pause.

"He never did," I say. "Our whole village did try—the police, search dogs, helicopters, divers, mountain rangers. No one, no one found her. She vanished. She was a good walker, you see, and there was a lot of flooding, so her body might have been dragged out to sea, as all the dams were opened."

"I'm very sorry," Dr. Camden says. "When my mother died of cancer, it was hard; but you have to move on and see that it is better for her that way."

Surprised, I lift my head to look him in the eye.

Oh no, not him!

I don't understand. Up to this point, he's seemed so understanding—about my weight, my insomnia. Until he spoke those last words, slowly resonating in my head:

"YOU...
HAVE...
TO...
MOVE...
ON!"

The familiar sense of disappointment, my heart sinking. Do I try to explain my experience to him, or do I just let it go? What's the point? *Aarghh!*

I have to, I tell myself. He's an educated man, a sensitive one; surely he only needs a nudge.

"Well, you see, it's difficult to move on," I begin. "I can't. People who have lost a loved one can't. Nor is it good to do so, because I don't know where she is. I don't know if someone kidnapped her; I don't know what happened to her. She could still be alive. It's not as easy as that."

"You can't move on?" he echoes.

"No. Because I don't have her body, which would tell me she is dead for sure. I don't have a grave to visit. I *can't* move on. In fact, moving on would mean that I'd given up on her. Even if the chances that she's survived are slim, nothing is sure."

"And what do the police say?"

"They think she fell into a river and died."

"I think it would help you to move on!" he says firmly, almost exasperated.

Back to square one.

"It isn't possible," I say, again. "Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about my insomnia and the constant worrying that wakes me up at night, too." Inwardly, I add: *—to keep from having to explain and justify my pain again, and to protect myself from being judged for feeling the way I feel.*

I haven't even mentioned how traumatic the search was; maybe I should have.

Maybe I should have told him about how unreal it felt to see helicopters and search dogs hunting for your mom. The terrible pang of hearing, "We have

twenty-four hours to find your mom alive.” And the panic when I realized how impossible a task it was. How shocking it was to see the police in our house, to see the village hall full of volunteers studying maps of the area, making detailed search plans while my father, my brother and I looked on, stunned, unable to think straight.

How heartbreaking it felt to try to sleep, listening to the rain, thinking of my mom all alone outside, because we couldn't search in the dark. How deeply disappointing it was that the press didn't report on her case until we'd involved a journalist we knew—and how unconceivable it was to hear people lie about her whereabouts to get attention. How devastating it was to hear a farmer describe the strange scent on his dog's coat; he suspected the dog might have rolled on her cadaver. How guilty we felt every day for not having saved her.

All of those memories and many more feel like a heavy, stifling coat that's impossible to remove—or like the weathered, tightened skin of a burn victim.

I glance at Dr. Camden, who sits quietly, a look of concern on his face.

How can he understand? I think. He doesn't know how it feels to wake up in the middle of the night with a dagger in your heart.

So I try again. Maybe I just need to find the words that will resonate with him. Maybe I just need to be analytical.

“You know, it's hard when people don't understand that I can't move on,” I say. “It is, really. I know we all want black-and-white answers, but when someone goes missing, there are none: You're just confronted with the impossible, the unthinkable, and a high level of uncertainty. People often forget that going missing is a situational crisis—unexpected and unanticipated.

“And families of missing persons respond the same ways as people exposed to sudden trauma—with shock, distress, confusion, ambivalence, a sense of being overwhelmed. That's why they need understanding: They're going through constant *trauma*, not grief.”

Will he understand? What I've just said sounds so cold, so clinical, so detached—as if I've stripped the experience of its meaning, its heart.

Gazing at me sympathetically, he says. “It must be awful to live with that uncertainty for so long.”

“Yes,” I say. “At first, it's as if everything has lost its ground. Then you learn to live with not-knowing, with the constant anxiety and uncertainty; it becomes part of your life. You become someone else, because you're always carrying the guilt of not having found the person you loved, and the constant doubts about what you did or didn't do.

“I still wake up at night about it, you know. The memory of the police search, the wait, the uncertainty is still traumatizing. What *really* hurts, though, is to feel so lonely—because you can't open up to anyone.

Nobody really understands what you're going through, you see."

"Listen," he says gently. "I'm so sorry it's had such a big impact on your life. It is hard for me to understand how it must feel to go through such a horrendous, life-changing event. But thank you for taking the time to explain it."

He pauses, looks me in the eye, then says, "I'm wondering: What would help you most now?"

For the first time, I feel heard. For the first time, I think: *He understands.*

"Just to talk, to be listened to," I say. □"To be understood...That's all."