

Stephanie (right) with sister Laura and beloved nan Anne



Anne was the life and soul of the party

Missing at CHRISTMAS

For so many families in the UK, there will be someone missing at the table this year – and the worst part is not knowing why

It's such a joyous time of year for so many – the decorations, the food and most importantly, time spent with loved ones. But for some people, the season brings painful reminders that someone is missing.

In the UK, 170,000 people are reported missing every year – around 96,000 adults and 75,000 children. And while 86% of adults and 90% of children are found within a few days, in some cases families find themselves waiting months, years and even decades for answers that may never come. It's agonising.

While it's thought that eight in 10 adults that go missing may be suffering with mental health issues and three in 10 may be coping with a relationship breakdown, often no one knows why people disappear, and that makes it so much harder for their loved ones to come to terms with their loss. *Woman* investigates...



'WE JUST WANT TO SAY GOODBYE'

Decades on, Stephanie Barwell, 38, still struggles to celebrate Christmas without her beloved nan.

Each and every Christmas, no matter how hectic or how busy, I always take a moment to remember my nan, who for so many years was the core to our family Christmas.

I can see her now, dancing around the living room, singing along to Irish crooner Daniel O'Donnell with me, then 10, and my sister, Laura, 15, all dressed up in her favourite Christmas jumper and matching Christmas tree earrings, red tinsel glittering in her blonde hair. My nan, Anne Simpson, then 53, was enjoying every moment that Christmas back in 1997, with all her family crammed into her small semi-detached house. There were a lot of us, and we were close – me, my sister Laura, as well as my mum Josie, then 33, and her four sisters Jackie, Julie, Jennifer and Janette. Birthdays, Christmas, Easter, we didn't need much excuse for a party and Nan was like our queen – we all adored her. She always seemed happiest at Christmas though, with her big white hair and glamorous dress sense, always smiling, having a good time.

EVERY 90 SECONDS – that's how often someone is reported missing in the UK.

These are the memories I still cling on to because a few years later, in May 2002, our family was rocked by the death of my aunty Jenny from cancer. Devastated by the loss of her youngest daughter, Nan, then 58, started drinking heavily and fell into a depression. We were so worried about her, but things seemed to be improving in August 2004, when Nan announced she and her best friend, Tom, then 47, were buying a caravan and moving to Skegness. We all knew how much Nan loved the seaside, and although it meant she'd be a two and half hour drive away, we were all happy for her, vowing to visit as much as we could. And me, Mum and Laura all noticed an immediate change in Nan when we went to stay with her a month afterwards. She seemed like her old self again, already having made friends at the caravan site clubhouse and the local pub, losing weight and buying new clothes. Our fun glamour queen was back.

I was 18 and heavily pregnant at the time and couldn't wait for my baby to meet his great nan. I promised her I'd be back to visit soon, as she wrapped me in a hug and tearily waved us all off from the clubhouse.



Anne on holiday, the year before she went missing

1% That's the proportion of adults in the UK who are missing for longer than a month.

Gone without a trace

But then, the next morning, Mum rang and told me Nan was missing. She explained how Nan had gone to the pub, but then never came back. I didn't understand – how could she just vanish? We discovered Nan had left her handbag behind, and Tom had told police she was an alcoholic and depressed so they suspected she may have been suicidal. But Nan had seemed so happy when we'd left her just hours before; besides, none of us believed for one minute she'd have done something like that.

Meanwhile, a huge sea search was launched for Nan and a few weeks later, I went into labour. Harri was born on 16 October 2004.

'Nan will come home now, she wouldn't miss meeting you for the world,' I sobbed, cradling my tiny boy.

But weeks, then months passed, and we heard nothing. We were all desperate for news, posting photos and handing out leaflets around Skegness.

Christmas that year was the worst we'd ever had. We'd hoped to be with Nan, as always, but her absence felt awful, my first Christmas without her. On the first anniversary of her disappearance we appeared on a TV show, reconstructing the events of that night, hoping someone might remember something. But nothing.

As the months turned to years, we began to accept Nan was never coming home, but we just wanted to know what happened to her.

Still, we never stopped looking for Nan and in 2011, I set up a Facebook group to appeal for information. And every Christmas, we all raised a glass to Nan, but it never felt the same without her and the family seemed to meet up a lot less.

Now, it's more than 20 years since Nan went missing. She'd be 81 now, still the matriarch of our family no doubt. In that time she's missed weddings, including mine to Michael, in June 2016, the birth of my children Hudson in 2013 and Hughie in 2018, as well as the births and birthdays of all her other great-grandchildren.

I've tortured myself thinking about what might have happened to her. Was she hurt, did someone take her, was she scared? We refuse to accept that she took her own life.

Whatever happened, someone out there must know. I'll keep putting out appeals and asking questions until I get some answers. We just want to lay Nan to rest and say goodbye. This Christmas, like I do every year, I'll think of my funny, glam, lovely Nan with her crazy dance moves and wicked sense of humour and I'll wish she was here to enjoy it, too.



Stephanie and her mother still want answers

'IT'S ONE OF THE HARDEST TIMES OF THE YEAR'

A spokesperson for the Missing People charity, Chantal Korcz, says:

'Christmas, which is so often portrayed as a time of joy and togetherness, can be particularly painful for families living with the absence of a loved one. For many, feelings of loss, isolation and uncertainty become sharper during the festive period, when the focus is on being with your loved ones, making it one of the hardest times of the year.

'At Missing People we're here seven days a week, 365 days a year to offer emotional support to anyone who is struggling, whether they're missing someone, worried about them, or feeling isolated themselves. Alongside our trained team, we also have a vibrant network of family members who provide invaluable peer-to-peer support. Speaking with others who understand can help people feel less alone and more hopeful.

'Although every family's situation is unique, a few gentle steps can make the season more manageable. Keeping some regular routines, reaching out to supportive friends or online communities, or creating a small ritual to remember a loved one can provide comfort. Even small acts of self-care, like a daily walk, a call to a friend, or time offline, can ease the strain. Above all, be kind to yourself and don't do anything you don't feel up to.'

For help and support, visit missingpeople.org.uk or call 11600. It's free and confidential