



Excerpt from *'If You Were There: Missing People and the Marks They Leave Behind'* by Francisco Garcia

Part II: The Searchers

I'd wanted to talk with the charity for a long time, even before this book was a reality. If nothing else, I wondered if they might be able to steer me on the right path if I ever wanted to try and trace Christobal. Months had passed since my meeting with Joe, when I spoke with Kirsty Hillman who runs Lost Contact. It was a very different experience to my meeting with Joe in the NCA office, though Kirsty was just as easy to speak to – another dedicated professional who took my questions in good grace and steered me around the work they do and all the manifold things that go into it. The Zoom link cracked slightly at the start of our chat, a new occupational hazard during some of my reporting in 2020. If the workload was challenging before, it had ramped up another gear with the pandemic, she told me. That was true for her part of the charity, though the entire operation was even busier than usual. '[Though] I think what I do has been impacted in another way, on another level, because there's so much anxiety around. People are feeling a sudden urgency to know where their loved ones are. It's about 50 to 60 per cent busier than before. It's a big jump. Obviously I used to have volunteers who worked with me and we've lost them at the moment, though I hope they'll return [at some point].' Kirsty, like her colleagues, was also working from home – an operational challenge in a job that requires so much face-to-face contact, with co-workers as well as those who she is helping search for their loved ones. It can be 'interesting', to use Kirsty's euphemism, with her own small children in the house. 'Some of the conversations I have can be very long and complex and there are hair-raising moments when you feel you might be interrupted. It is what it is,' she added with a smile.

Kirsty is younger than Joe and hasn't spent as much time immersed with the missing. She joined Missing People in early 2017, after a prior career in events. Originally, she'd been in a fundraising role before a new job came up in the relaunched Lost Contact service. Its appeal was immediate. 'I thought it was fascinating and wanted to get more front-line experience. I've been in the role for over a year now. [One of] the things that surprised me when I started was the sheer volume of issues and just how broad they were. It can feel like every other issue feeds into missing.' After the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines introduced in 2018 meant that the service had to radically change. Previously, they'd been able to hold information without the express consent of the person being looked for. As the law shifted, this was no longer possible, Kirsty explained. 'For instance, I'd ask you about your dad and he hasn't authorised me [to hold that information]. Rather than take any risks with that, we decided to close the service for about a year and a half. The relaunch was just to make sure we were protecting that data and doing it right.' It was also a chance to expand what they had offered, an opportunity as well as a constraint. Previously, the service was exclusively for people that had been in contact over the previous 15 years. It now stands at 20. They've also secured a new funder, 'which is fantastic', Kirsty added. Though she still sits within Missing People, her payroll comes from a corporate sponsor. 'These were major, fundamental changes. I came in to run the service, as someone solely dedicated to it, instead of other people chipping in [along with] their other roles.'

Missing People aren't alone in offering a tracing service. There are others that have more money and resources. '[For example] the Salvation Army's is huge,' Kirsty explained. Though

she was happy to tell me about Missing People's process, some things have to remain confidential, like the names of the professional bodies they work with. Before they begin there are also criteria that need to be met before a case gets taken on. Firstly, there has to have been some contact in the last two decades. It has to have been what is called substantial contact: they have to have met and have had a relationship of some kind. Practically speaking, there are also necessary details: a full name, a date of birth, the last known address. These are key. The person being searched for has to be over 18, as does the person looking. They have to be, or thought to be, in the UK. There can't be a legal reason preventing contact. After that, there is an online application to be filled in, though for those that can't, the option is there to do it over the phone. At that point, Kirsty will assess the data and come back with a list of questions, trying to get to the bottom of their circumstances. 'I'm trying to get as much information as possible, red flags as well as anything that might help me [in the search]. We go through all of that and if everything fits then we'll take on the case and send over a pledge that just gives a bit of understanding about how we work.' One of the most common mistakes by applicants is the idea that Missing People can enforce contact, just as Joe had said about the NCA's work. 'People might think we can just hand over an address and say "here you go". It's something I spend a lot of time with,' Kirsty added, 'trying to explain that we will only put people in contact if the person that is being looked for wants it. There are quite a lot of ifs and that can be tough for families. Particularly when it's a parent looking for a child – an adult child – of theirs. They just want to know if they're ok and it can be hard for them to accept that there might be no answer at all.' Andrew Gosden's family came straight to mind. The decade and more of pain and ambiguity: the kind of grief to make your blood run cold. There is also the question of time in Kirsty's work. Sometimes the search might take a week, it might take up to a year, with no guarantee of success. There is also bad news to deliver and sometimes the worst. 'We get a certain amount of death notifications which we then need to relate back,' she explained carefully. 'It's about preparing people for the possible outcomes.'

That doesn't just mean death. It applies to those who are found, just as readily. 'The return might still be a very traumatic and upsetting experience. I think sometimes there is a lot of courage in knowing that it might be right not to be in touch, which is really hard. [Coming back] isn't the end of the story. I see that more and more. It's a very brave decision. If someone has had their lives turned upside down, then sometimes it might not always be the right answer. The old me might never have said that before starting this job.'

The world of the missing is rarely simple, for those on either side of its divide, the lost and those left in their shadow. Of course, the desire to know is a powerful thing, perhaps one of the most powerful and painful needs to live with. 'If only I knew' is a common refrain and one I'm all too willing to admit has been a bigger part of my own life than I occasionally care to imagine. But it isn't the kind of knowledge that solves the tangles of what led to his absence in the first place. It isn't a magic bullet, fixed to fix his struggles with drink, or win his other myriad battles. 'It's never as simple as that when you're looking at addiction, or homelessness, or debt and mental health. There are so many things. It just doesn't end there,' as Kirsty added.

As well as the difficulties, it's important to remember the successful reconnections, of which there are many in amongst all of the false starts and thwarted leads. They are the reason Kirsty does the job she does. There is no other feeling that quite compares to it. At the time of our talk, she had 130 open files to work through, with some needing more support and attention than others. There are often surprises: the cases that remain stamped vividly on the imagination. Recently, Kirsty reunited a brother and sister who hadn't seen each other in two decades. 'I received an email saying that yes, he wanted to be put in contact, and that was amazing. After that, I had an email from her, saying they'd just lost another relative who had passed away a few months before. The things she said made me cry, they were so wonderful. That I could have no idea how much we'd changed her life. I've spoken to her on the phone every day since. She got to tell their elderly mother that her son was back. I can't imagine another job where you get the experience of hearing that and being able to play a part in it. It's the best feeling in the world.'

Kirsty is under no illusions about the emotional pull her work holds, for herself as well as the people who she is trying to help. 'Just before Christmas, we had a son who was looking for his mother and we reconnected them. The message I had from her was that she had been having suicidal thoughts and that the reconnection had essentially saved her life. You can't quite believe the honour of being the person who helps to make that happen.' The question of support is always somewhere near the surface, with the tracing process apt to stir up dormant fears in both the searcher and the searched for, like another recent case of an elderly father looking to contact his son. It's natural that people get worried about blame and questions about the past, some of which can never be answered or addressed to anyone's satisfaction. 'The son wrote a message to me that he wanted to be passed to his dad and there was no way I could have read it over the phone, it was so moving. Instead, I posted it to him. I've had a few messages from the dad since, saying how happy he was and that the fear he had is gone now.' I hadn't really thought too much about that fear yet. It isn't a word I've ever had too much use for, when it comes to Christobal. After we spoke, I realised that their criteria meant that I couldn't take his case to Kirsty at Missing People, even if I decided I wanted to. Though it was just within the 20-year limit, I didn't have a reasonably accurate last address and knew that if he was anywhere, he was almost certain to be in La Línea and not in the UK. From the start I'd thought about what a reunion would look like. How it could play out as farce. Him in his broken English, me with my non-existent Spanish, relying on gestures and body language, both equally incapable of putting the point across with any clarity. And if by chance the barriers to communication were levelled, what could we say to one another that wouldn't immediately stiffen to embarrassed silence? Where to even begin, catching up with half a lifetime's worth of mystery and unsaid things.