

Marije's daughter is missing

“The day she disappeared, my life exploded”

Sophia Koetsier disappeared almost eight years ago in a wildlife park in Uganda. Her mother, Marije Slijkerman (66) continues to search for her. “We only have questions, no answers.”

Interview Deborah Ligtenberg Photography Petra Hoogerbrug

“Sophia’s passport and some clothes, every time I travel to Uganda to find my daughter, that’s what I carry with me. And each time I hope it will be the last trip to that country, because we go home together. We know we may never get Sophia back, may never know what happened to her, but that has never been my point of departure. As long as we don’t have evidence of the contrary, she is there for us.

In the course of time I have made a number of contacts in Uganda, including with police and public prosecution. I have spoken with both the president and the first lady, and with people who worked and socialised with Sophia. I try to find as many people who might have more information. Always with the hope of getting closer to Sophia. Those trips are not easy to make, but giving up, doing nothing, is no option.

How can I abandon my daughter? She absolutely cannot be forgotten.”

Bipolar

“Sophia plays the piano very well, she’s a good writer and draws well. She likes to dance and has a lot of friends. After secondary school she acquired her bachelor of medicine from the University of Amsterdam, never failing one exam, with very good grades. And, in addition, always having a part time job. During her study she worked as a flex worker in home care. She is ambitious, a hard worker. Very focused too; if she has something in her head, nothing will stop her from doing that.

Shortly before her sixteenth birthday Sophia has been diagnosed as bipolar. A characteristic of this is mood swings, from high to low. Sophia however belongs to the small group that only becomes manic. She will become very energetic then, but will have trouble sleeping. Such manic episodes, caused by stress, an abundance of impressions, have occurred three times. Always with long intervals of two years or longer. With medication and rest she recovers very quickly. It also never held her back in anything. We have never seen her depressed. When Sophia left for Uganda late August of 2015, to do an eight week internship in a hospital, she was very stable. My husband and I, and her doctor too, did not worry.”

Different behaviour

“Sophia was having a good time there, which we knew already through the extensive weekly reports she sent us. I had travelled to Uganda to look her up, I wanted to see my daughter in a white coat in an African hospital. She liked that too, otherwise I would not have come. The last time I saw her we had dinner together. She then said that she wasn’t really ready to go home yet. If they would ask her to stay on for another two months, she’d immediately say

'yes'. The next day was her last day in the hospital and the day after that she was going to travel the country for two weeks.

On October 28th, I was still in Kampala, when one of her Dutch travel companions called me. They were worried, Sophia had been behaving differently over the last few days. She had informed them she is bipolar and this could be a manic episode. They wanted to take her back to Kampala. I knew instinctively that Sophia would not want that. She had called me that afternoon and told me that it was such a beautiful trip. That's why I advised the companion to make up an excuse so that it wouldn't clear right away that the trip would be aborted. In retrospect we think Sophia did know, she always hears and sees everything. And then she was gone."

Bad feeling

"More than forty hours after Sophia's disappearance a weird trail of items was found along the river Nile. Pieces of textile, some tied to dead wood, other pieces on the ground, together one trouser leg. A strikingly clean shoe and two inside soles. Her sunglasses, a small African purse. High in a tree a pair of knickers, pulled over a branch. I saw it all and photographed each item, strongly feeling this was not right. And that there must be people who knew more.

Local police immediately 'concluded' that Sophia had fallen in the river and drowned, or attacked by a wild animal. But then you would have found traces of blood, signs of a struggle, and of course human remains. Those were not there.

I really did not see Sophia's hand here. Her generation is very prudish, only to a sauna when you could wear a bathing suit, those kinds of things. Taking off her knickers? Absolutely not. And where were the garments of her upper body? Wouldn't you find a pile of clothes when someone goes swimming? Various experts later called it 'a manipulated scene', a red herring, to lead people in the wrong direction. That seems very plausible to us because we have never seen such a thing from Sophia, in whatever condition. It is so atypical, so not who she is.

Because so much isn't right we have to continue to do everything possible, so I keep going back to that country to make sure they won't forget Sophia. Usually by myself, I am used to travelling alone and have built up a small network there. My husband isn't much of a traveller and less fit. Our sons have both been there once but I don't want to burden them. They have a whole life ahead of them. Under the circumstances they are doing alright; one has his first real job, the other one started a second master study."

Unacceptable

"The investigation about Sophia's disappearance left a lot to be desired, as has been acknowledged in Uganda at a later stage. Almost immediately after Sophia's disappearance 'mental problems' were mentioned, in other words: 'she was crazy and must have done something stupid'. So it must be a fatal accident. End of story. Police both in Uganda and in the Netherlands quickly jumped to this 'conclusion'. But it's such a strange story, it just doesn't add up. And if you don't really know anything, how can you so easily exclude other scenarios, including a crime? Such a tunnel vision is unacceptable. We cannot rule out that Sophia came across the wrong people. What happened then, we don't know.

We did not receive much help from The Netherlands, our home country. To investigate the found items for DNA was not seen as useful because they had likely not been secured

properly by the Ugandan police. We ultimately had a DNA investigation done ourselves. Male DNA has been found on the items but thus far no match had been found. The public prosecutor in Amsterdam has never really gotten involved either. We feel left alone by the Dutch authorities, with the exception of the Dutch ambassador in Uganda, who gives support where she can.

“No child is as present as a missing child. For me Sophia is there, always and everywhere”

I really can't imagine that Sophia is no longer there, it doesn't feel like that at all. If that's maternal intuition or wishful thinking, I don't know. Her disappearance is a huge puzzle with most pieces missing. If you don't know anything, then everything is possible and I am a staunch believer in miracles. The most unlikely things happen in life, after all. And Sophia is very strong, both physically and mentally. If she's still alive, we don't think she is free. If she were, it would be very hard to understand why she doesn't seek contact. Under which circumstances she then lives..., I try to think about that as little as possible.”

Hope and despair

“The day Sophia disappeared my life exploded and the pieces are still everywhere. Carefree laughing, or intensely enjoying something; it's no longer possible, as if there is a brake on everything. Reading a serious book; can't do it, concentration is lacking. Listening to music; far too emotional, especially piano music.

No child is as present as a missing child, for me Sophia is there, always and everywhere. A disappearance cannot be compared to anything, you know nothing. Therapy is not useful, what's there to process? The trauma goes on. It's a continuous fight between hope and despair, the not knowing is devastating. We only have questions and no answers.

At our first meeting in Uganda Sophia took a selfie of the two of us. A smiling mother with a smiling daughter. Same mouth, nose, neck and forehead. They belong together.

Both those faces are gone and I so very much want them back. My only wish. I miss her enormously.

The confrontation with her absence is often there. A mother and a daughter walking arm in arm, will I ever be able to do that again? A young woman on her bicycle, with messy bun in her dark blonde hair, like Sophia. But it's not here. Her old bike is parked in front of our house. Ever since she left I only had to put a bit of air in the tyres three times. As if that bicycle is waiting for here. Just like us.”

PS

Sophia Koetsier, then 21, did a two month internship in a hospital in the Ugandan capital Kampala in 2015. She had just acquired her bachelor of Medicine from the Amsterdam University and was taking a gap year. In wildlife park Murchison Falls National Park she allegedly went to the toilet in the early evening and was never seen again. Thanks to Marije's lobbying a new investigation into Sophia's mysterious disappearance has been started in Uganda.

The text with the large portrait on the first page reads:

“Giving up is not an option. How can I abandon my daughter?”