



# Nine years without Sophia

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BY MARIJE SLIJKERMAN

Tomorrow it will be October 28. For most of you, a perfectly ordinary day, but not for us, a Dutch family in Amsterdam. Another year has passed for us without Sophia. Our beautiful girl disappeared in Murchison Falls National Park on this date in 2015.

Although nine years have now passed, it still feels as if Sophia left just a few months ago. I can still clearly see her standing at the check-in desk at Schiphol Airport. Her huge rucksack, bought a week before with her father.

Her solid hiking boots, bought just a few days earlier with me, her mother. Two months later I found myself standing on the banks of the River Nile, photographing one of those boots lying there in the tall grass. No trace of Sophia. I had a strong feeling something was wrong.

## Brief background

After acquiring her medical degree, Sophia decided to take a gap year and came to Uganda to work as an intern at Rubaga Hospital in Kampala.

She thoroughly enjoyed her time there, completely immersed herself in the city, the people and the culture and even learned a fair amount of Luganda. After her disappearance I met several of her local colleagues.

They all spoke highly of her, praising her openness, her dedication to the patients, her willingness to do anything. Including mopping floors, if that was what was needed.

After the internship ended Sophia went to explore Uganda with two fellow interns, before returning home. On the sixth day of her journey, she disappeared. The story is that she went to the toilet and was never seen again.

The initial investigation was less than thorough. Quickly, it was assumed Sophia had fallen victim to an accident, a wild animal, but no remains were ever found.

## The search

That day, October 28, 2015, our lives exploded and a desperate search for our

missing girl started which is still continuing. Thus far, I have made 25 journeys to Uganda. One because I wanted to visit my daughter. Secondly, because I must, to find my daughter.

Soon I will be returning for the 26th time. Always hoping it will be my last one and that I finally will not go home alone.

We are aware that, statistically speaking, the longer someone is missing, the slimmer the chances of finding them. But miracles happen and I strongly believe in them. If nothing is sure, everything is possible.

In the course of my trips, I have tracked down witnesses, gathered information and spoken to many people. Paradoxically, the more information I collected the more questions arose. For quite a while, there was also communication with the police.

Sophia(L) and her mother Marije Slijkerman.

PHOTO/COURTESY MARIJE SLIJKERMAN.

## QUICK NOTE

**Tough moments.** Common things remind me of her. A mother and a daughter in a store, a young blonde woman on her bike, young doctors in their white coats rushing through hospital corridors; it all gives me a shock. A rough confrontation with reality.

This contact unfortunately ended in the spring of 2022 when a new investigation was started by the Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID). We were told to give them three months to produce a report.

Three months passed, six months passed, then a year. It was frustrating, not having a clue about this investigation's findings.

Early October 2023, we finally did receive a CID report but it did not tell us anything new. Several important questions were not addressed at all. It was truly disappointing and we felt thrown back to square one.

Finding the truth is never easy but we have to hope that we will eventually get to the bottom of the mystery of Sophia's disappearance.

## The perpetual pain

For nine years now the basis of our daily life has been deep agony and insecurity. And the fear that this can be a life sentence, that we shall never know where Sophia is. Yes, we know life goes on but no, time does not heal all wounds. On the contrary. Our wound only gets bigger and more painful as time passes.

I hear the same from people in the same situation, many of those in Uganda as well. No child is as present as a missing child. The unknown fate of your child haunts you. It is the first thought in the morning, the last one before going to sleep. If you can sleep.

As long as we have no evidence to the contrary, we maintain hope that Sophia is somewhere and that one day she will be back with us.

People often speak of the strength of maternal instinct. As Sophia's mother I feel her presence everywhere. Common things remind me of her.

A mother and a daughter in a store, a young blonde woman on her bike, young doctors in their white coats rushing through hospital corridors; it all gives me a shock.

A rough confrontation with reality; I am not walking with my daughter, her bike is standing in front of our house, Sophia is not rushing through a hospital in a white coat. And we do not know if she ever will.

She is missed immensely, even more so, if that is possible, on those special occasions; her brothers graduating and birthdays. That 'Happy Birthday Mama!' exactly at midnight. We miss her enthusiasm, her creativity, her ideas and initiatives, and her incredible zest for life.

It is certainly not easy to keep going but hope springs eternal and we must do all that is humanly possible to get to the truth. I am determined to take every road that unfolds in front of me. The only way to find out where it leads, is to start walking. Giving up on Sophia is absolutely no option.

We can use all the help we can get and are hugely grateful to those who have always stuck with us and still give support where they can.

What we cannot use are people who try to make money from our tragedy by falsely claiming to know where Sophia is.

Surely, there must be more honourable ways to make money. Aren't they aware rewards are only paid after a missing person is found, never before?

Sophia's mysterious disappearance has received considerable media coverage, including a film made by Dutch public television. It can all be found on: [www.findSophia.org](http://www.findSophia.org).

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Sophia with a group of children.