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Agonising search for missing mum

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'PEOPLE don't just disappear, do they?' It is the question which Julia Brock and her family have been wrestling with for the last four agonising weeks.

Exactly a month ago today, her 78-year-old mother vanished without a trace from a secure luxury holiday resort in Mexico, just hours after arriving.

Julia Howard told her family, who were sunbathing by the pool, that she was going to fetch her sun hat and then go for a walk.

But the great-grandmother-of-seven never completed the 35-yard walk to her room and, according to security staff at the Moon Palace Golf & Spa Resort in Cancun, there was no record of her having left the hotel.

Over the next few days, police officers trawled the complex and surrounding area, with dogs and even horses deployed and specialist divers searching the sea, but no trace has ever been found.

Speaking for the first time since taking the heartbreaking decision to return to her Firrhill home, leaving the authorities in Mexico to continue the search, Mrs Brock today told the Evening News of the family's torment and her continuing hope that the mystery would be solved.

"For the first few days, I just expected her to walk back round the same corner. It wasn't real and at the moment it's still not real," said the 55-year-old, who had joined her mother, brother Henry Harvey, 56, and his wife Glynnis, 55, on the two-week holiday.

"People don't just disappear, it's like something out of one of these sci-fi things. It's been a nightmare."

A widower of 11 years, Mrs Howard, described as "independent and active", vanished on 16 June – 12 hours after arriving in a resort she knew well.

When she did not return from her walk, the family knew that something was wrong and initially thought she may have fallen over. They desperately searched the huge complex and the path on the beach front along which Mrs Howard walked, but there was no sign of her.

As the days went on, Mrs Howard's other son Ron, 53, left his home in the Philippines to help with the search before returning home with Mrs Brock.

Mrs Brock, finance manager for the Thistle Foundation charity, said: "My mum never got as far as the room because there was no record of her using her security card to get in. The security staff showed my brother the CCTV footage from that day but she wasn't on it."

She added: "There have been sightings of her a couple of hours away from the complex but nobody can explain how she got off the complex. It's a secure complex and you have got to show an ID tag to get in and out, and the hotel said there was no record of her leaving the hotel.

"It just doesn't make sense. The only way she could have got off the complex is if a senior member of staff took her off because they are the only people who can get out without showing identification, but you can't accuse the hotel of doing that."

This year was the fifth consecutive year that Mrs Howard, who has a flat on Roseburn Drive in Roseburn, had stayed at the Moon Palace, which she described as "heaven on earth".

"She went for a walk every day all the other years, too, so it wasn't unusual for her to want to go for a walk," said Mrs Brock, who claimed that the Mexican police did not start their search until 12 hours after her mother was reported missing.

Mrs Brock, who lives on Firrhill Drive, added: "The police acted like it was just some dithery old woman and I didn't believe that they were really that interested.

"The hotel said they went round all the guests and knocked on the room doors, but I don't believe they did because I didn't hear anybody talking about it. It would have frightened the living daylights out of them."

She continued: "One of my cousins is an ambassador to Congo and he got in touch with the ambassador of Mexico and asked if everything was being done, and he was told yes, so there was pressure put on from there."

Thomas Cook extended the family's stay but, since returning, they have not heard anything from the Mexican authorities.

Mr Harvey, who returned home to Balerno a few days before his sister last week, added: "Last week was one of the worst weeks of my life. Leaving Cancun was one of the hardest decisions I've ever had to make. I felt terrible and it was very emotional and upsetting, but there was simply nothing we could do. It's been a living hell.

"I was very close to my mum; I met her two to three times a week for coffee and took her messages every Friday. It seems strange that I'm not doing that now."

One of Mrs Howard's six grandchildren, Philip, 27 – Mrs Brock's son – was devastated by the disappearance of his nana.

He said: "When my mum told me the news, I just didn't really know what to think other than why would someone take my nana, and where could she possibly have gone? Without knowing what has happened to her, we can't carry on with our lives."

Mrs Brock, who returned to work on Tuesday, said: "I think my mum walked round that corner and saw something that she shouldn't have, and somebody has taken her off the complex."

Mr Harvey agreed: "I still come to the conclusion that, because she has not been found in the complex, she must have been taken. God only knows why because she's a frail old lady with no money.

"What baffles me is that she was the third person in the last two years to vanish without trace from the Yucatan Peninsula. That seems very strange to me."

He disputed reports that the Mexican police had suggested that the family had murdered Mrs Howard for life insurance money, but did confirm that one of the first questions the family was asked by police was if she had any life insurance and who would be the beneficiary.

The family said Mrs Howard did not have any. She took early retirement from her position as a finance officer for the former Lothian Regional Council at the age of 50. Her husband Ted died of a heart attack on holiday in

Portugal in 1998.

Mrs Brock added: "As far as I'm aware, everybody is still looking for her and I just hope that they find her. What makes it so difficult is that if they don't find anything, there is nothing we can do."

FAMILY WERE SET TO CANCEL TRIP

THE family of missing pensioner Julia Howard have told how they very nearly did not go on the sunshine holiday to the resort where she disappeared.

The outbreak of swine flu in Mexico meant they were set to change their break and go somewhere else.

But the Foreign and Commonwealth Office lifted its advisory ban against all but essential travel to Mexico on 15 May, just a month before the family were due to travel to Cancun.

Son Henry Harvey said: "We were going to cancel the holiday and go somewhere else but my mother loved the Moon Palace. With hindsight, I wish we had now."

Daughter Julia Brock added: "The travel agents said we should leave it as late as possible before cancelling and if the ban wasn't lifted, they would arrange somewhere else. I wish we hadn't gone."

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