

SNATCHED

THE DAY MY BABY SISTER DISAPPEARED

More than 35,000 Australians go missing each year. To mark National Missing Persons Week on 30 July, Stephen explains why he'll never stop searching for his sister

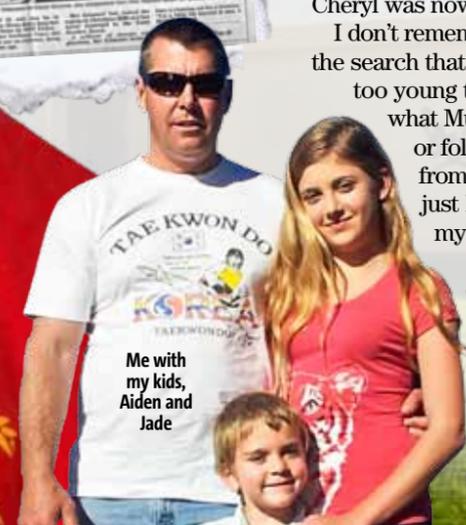
Stephen Grimmer, 48, Wollongong, NSW



I just want to know what happened to my sister



Cheryl as a child - two days before she went missing



Me with my kids, Aiden and Jade

It was the phone call I had waited more than 30 years for. Shaking, I listened to the police officer on the end of the line. 'A woman has come forward who thinks she might be Cheryl,' he told me. Hope mingled with disbelief in my mind. Could it really be true?

Cheryl's my younger sister and it has been 42 long years since she's last been seen.

The nightmare began with a morning at the beach back in 1970. After emigrating from England, my siblings, Rick, then seven, Paul, four and Cheryl, just three, and I loved nothing more than splashing about in the sea.

When the temperature soared on that January day, our mum, Carole, took us for a dip at Fairy Meadow Beach in NSW, while our father, Vince, was at work. Afterwards, she sent us to the shower block to rinse off while she gathered up all our things.

Clutching Cheryl's hand, we giggled as we got ready. But after drying ourselves, Cheryl must've wandered off. We called for her but she didn't reply, so we got Mum to come and fetch her. But Cheryl was nowhere to be seen.

I don't remember much about the search that followed. I was too young to understand what Mum's tears meant, or follow the questions from the detectives. I just knew I wanted my sister back.

As news of Cheryl's disappearance spread, police, residents and Dad's work

colleagues at the local army barracks all searched tirelessly for a sign of our lost little girl.

It became one of Australia's biggest manhunts, but hope soon gave way to despair. Witnesses told police that they had seen a man pick up a young girl and run from the beach at around the same time Cheryl disappeared.

Although the police had three main suspects, none could be positively identified as the man the witnesses saw.

In spite of numerous appeals - and even a \$5000 reward offered by the NSW Government for information - there was no breakthrough in the inquiry. An apparent confession by one man turned out to be false.

The investigations threw up more questions than answers, and I grew up without my sister by my side. But none of us could let go, and even after we moved home, Cheryl's clothes still lay folded in the cupboard. Photos of her still adorned the walls.

'I won't give up,' Mum vowed. Gradually though, the agony of hoping and waiting became part of life. Sometimes it seemed like Mum was going through the motions, desperate to be there for us kids, but still totally overwhelmed with grief.

Dad could hardly bring himself to speak of the tragedy. Instead, he numbly stared at photos of Cheryl - hoping it would bring her back somehow. *If only...*

Over the years we learnt to live with the uncertainty. Every

time I passed a girl with curly hair in the street, I'd study her face. I'd lose hours wondering whether my sister was out there with another family who had taken her in as one of their own.

Would I know her if I saw her? And would she know me? These questions tortured me. But life has to go on, and as the years passed I finished school and at 25, I fell in love. Carrie was my soul mate. I told her about my missing sister straightaway.

Every time I passed a girl with curly hair, I'd study her face

By then, that day at the beach seemed so long ago, but Carrie understood how it had affected my family, and how I couldn't rest until I knew the truth.

She was a huge support when police re-examined the case years later. They compiled an image of what Cheryl might look like in her 30s, hoping it might spark someone's memory. Cheryl had a medical condition which meant her belly button protruded by a centimetre. If she was alive, perhaps she'd read about it and realise who she was.

The image got a lot of media attention but sadly it brought no real leads. Tragically, a year later my dad passed away from lung cancer, never having discovered what really happened to his girl.

Devastated, I threw myself into family life. When Carrie and I had a daughter, Jade, now 13, and then a boy, Aiden, now five, I was determined to protect them.

Scarred by my experience, I vowed to watch them like a

hawk and make sure they knew all about stranger-danger.

Then, a year after Aiden was born, came that phone call that rocked my world. Police said a woman had come forward, believing she was Cheryl. She even sent them a cotton bud with a swab from the inside of her cheek to be tested for DNA. For two weeks I believed there was a chance of a reunion. But I kept the news secret, wanting to spare Mum the agony, in case it turned out to be a false lead.

Sadly, it was. Police told me that the woman wasn't a match to Cheryl's DNA. My heart sank. Hadn't we been through enough?

Three years later, an inquest was finally held into Cheryl's disappearance. The coroner Sharon Freund ruled that, based on all the evidence, Cheryl died some time after she disappeared.

I guess it should have brought us closure - but without proof it's impossible to put the case to rest. There are still so many questions. A year on, we still wonder if Cheryl was taken by a couple who lost their own child and raised as their own. She'd be 46 years old now.

If she's still out there, I want her to know that we will never give up hope. Perhaps one day I'll hug my sister again. ●

As told to Stacey Hicks
Cheryl's story is among several told in Missing You: Australia's Most Mysterious Unsolved Missing Persons Cases by Justine Ford, published by The Five Mile Press. Visit www.fivemile.com.au.

A MOTHER'S LOSS

Cheryl's mum Carole says:

A feeling of numbness took over my body for years as I waited for Cheryl to come home.

When Vince passed away without ever knowing what happened it broke my heart, but our other three children brought us so much joy, and we had to keep going for them. I've now got 12 beautiful grandchildren and two great grandchildren. I can only hope they'll meet their Auntie Cheryl one day.



A composite picture of what Cheryl might look like today

\$600

See story coupon for details

TELL US YOUR STORY

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