

Stoneboat



BEYOND RED AND BLUE

V O I C E S F O R A M E R I C A

Missing

I didn't know the guy, never met him. But I have what passes for a "friendship" in this digital age with his sister-in-law Kristi. Facebook popped the question in April. Would I like to be friends with Kristi Small? Kristi! Wonderful lady. I worked with her almost twenty years ago, but hadn't seen or heard from her since. Yes! Of course! Let's be friends!

We exchange Facebook messages: my daughter has now graduated from college; Kristi has grandchildren, twins, adorable toddlers. We share a similar sense of humor and compatible politics; we "like" each other's postings and photos. Before long she really does feel like a friend, although we never meet. We could—we don't live very far apart—but we don't suggest it.

Then, in early August, she posts something startling: Her brother-in-law Nick has gone missing while hiking in the mountains. He was backpacking with three buddies and somehow became separated from them at the top of a remote mountain ridge. He never made it back to the campsite. As an avid hiker and backpacker, I am immediately pulled into this story. I follow the numerous comments from people who know this guy, all very reassuring. He's resilient, resourceful, experienced, well-equipped, the weather is fine.

But two days come and go, and there's no sign of him. On Facebook there is a link to an article in the local newspaper: "Newton Man Missing." A photograph shows bright blue eyes, a kind smile, and a red-tinged beard. He's fifty-nine years old but fit and trim. The Forest Service has Search and Rescue teams looking from the air, and his friends re-trace their steps many times, but he's vanished.

The tone of the Facebook posts becomes more frantic. He has a loving wife—Kristi's sister—and a teenage daughter. There's a poignant photograph

of him on the top of the mountain, taken twenty minutes before he disappeared. I notice lots of praying in the comments. I find myself not praying (that's not my thing) but hoping, visualizing, willing him to turn up.

But he doesn't. After five days, the search is called off. The theory is that, having gone ahead of his friends on the descent, he fell off the steep ridge and stumbled to his death; his body can't be found in the steep terrain and dense vegetation. I add my condolences to the outpouring of grief. I read about the memorial service and see photos of Nick and his family. A sad story. I think of him when I go on my own summer backpacking trip two weeks later. Then the story fades into the background as I resume my busy life.

But a month after Nick's disappearance, Kristi's Facebook posts return to the story. His body has still not been found, and they are continuing the search. The Forest Service has long since suspended its operation, so family members and friends are going it alone, driven by a compelling need to bring him home. A volunteer helicopter pilot equipped with a high speed camera has taken 6,000 photos from the air; these are being dissected and analyzed for clues. It becomes clear that Nick was not mortally wounded in the fall; they have found the probable site with evidence of a plunge from the granite cliffs, a slide into deep brush, and then footsteps heading down the other

side of the mountain. They are trying to follow those footsteps.

I find myself riveted by this search. I wish I could drop everything and join in the hunt, but I have work commitments; I can't do that. So I watch from afar. I look for Facebook updates every day. I'm not sure why it's so compelling. It's part mystery, part adventure story, like a good movie or a novel—but this story has no happy ending. He's presumed to be dead, and they are searching for his body. I imagine how awful this must be for his loved ones. The best outcome is the worst thing you would ever want to find.

No one in my real life is paying any attention.

"There's still no sign of him," I say to my partner.

"What?"

"Nick, that guy. They can't find him."

"Who?"

"That guy who was lost in the mountains. The brother-in-law of the woman you've never met; who I worked with twenty years ago and haven't seen since. My Facebook friend Kristi."

"Oh. Right."

In my 40+ years of backcountry hiking, I've had a few close calls. I inexplicably lost the trail once when hiking alone in a little-traveled area of Yosemite's high country and became totally disoriented for an hour. I had to fight off a rising panic in my chest and focus on using my compass and map-reading skills while not stumbling on the uneven rocks. Another time, I was in a group of women led astray by an inexperienced guide on a backcountry ski trip and had to spend the night sleeping out in the open, in the snow, with no shelter and very little food. Worst of all, when I was in my late twenties, a fluke of good luck broke my fall as I slid backwards down a steep, icy snow field in the French Alps. I somehow rammed into a small crevice of soft snow in the shelter of a rock, my backpack absorbing most of the impact.

Maybe that's why I'm so captivated. I feel like it could have been me.

What happened to Nick that day? Did he make

some unwise decisions, or did he just have bad luck? Where is he?

I was equally obsessed with the disappearance of the Malaysian airliner. It vanished the day before I flew across the ocean to visit friends and family in England, and I spent a fortune when I far exceeded the allowance of my international data plan because I was compelled to check CNN multiple times a day. Was it sabotage or a catastrophic mechanical failure? I read every self-proclaimed expert's opinion. Years later, there are still no answers in that mystery. Those survivors are also in limbo. And they can hardly launch an independent search of the depths of the Indian Ocean.

Perhaps I just hate it whenever anything goes missing. I rarely lose things. In our household, I'm not the one who is unable to find her keys or phone. So when I do lose something, it drives me crazy, threatens my sense of being in control. I went nuts when I lost my camera three days into a month-long trip to New Zealand. It never did show up. I had to buy a new one in a store outside Wellington. I was so distraught the guy took pity on me and gave me a great price.

A memory surfaces, something I haven't thought of in years. For my ninth birthday, I was given a watch. I had to remember to wind it at bedtime and carefully remove it from my wrist before washing my hands. That summer, my family vacationed at the beach. I played happily in the sand with my two younger brothers. I suppose we also swam in the sea, although I don't remember that. "Where's your watch?" my mother said as we prepared to leave. I had no idea. I had no memory of taking it off. We searched everywhere, combed the sand. The watch had vanished. I wasn't responsible enough to own a watch after all.

Two or three years later, my father cut his finger on a Sunday afternoon outing. My mother opened the first aid tin she kept in the glove compartment—and discovered my watch. To her credit, she apologized and realized she herself must have placed it there for safe-keeping.

My mother had her own tragic experience

with missing family members. I can't believe it's taken me so long to make the connection, but I suppose she taught me to bury the memory deep. Her generation was trained to not dwell on emotion, and she coped with her traumatic loss by squirreling away the pain into some secret corner of her heart.

Growing up, I knew the bare bones of the story. She had escaped Czechoslovakia just before the Nazis arrived, but her mother and her nine-year-old sister were left behind and did not survive the Holocaust. It was not until I was in my early twenties that I started to probe. What was that like? What did she know, when did she know it?

In a subdued tone, she revealed that throughout the war, she had held out hope that they might survive, that her little sister at least might have been hidden somewhere in safety. But in 1945, her worst fears were confirmed; they had both been deported to the ghetto at Terezín and from there to an unknown extermination camp. She confessed that the worst part was not knowing where or when they died. That always haunted her.

Another two weeks pass, and there's still no sign of Nick's body, no sign of any clothing, his hat or his daypack. The volunteers have followed those footprints three thousand feet down the mountain, but they are running out of time, stamina, food. And now there's a new twist to the story. Because he has not been found, his widow cannot receive survivor benefits. For seven years. He's not officially dead. She's in financial and legal limbo. So there's a new push and now a fund-raising appeal. They need \$20,000 for a helicopter that can drop the volunteer trackers directly into the remote search area. They're in a race against time with winter on its way. So please give what you can. Any unused funds will be donated to families in similar situations.

I immediately give one hundred dollars. Now I receive daily emails from GoFundMe. Within a week they have raised over \$10,000. I read updates on the search. These are written by Laura—Nick's wife, Kristi's sister. A woman I've never met. Yet it's always the first message I

open. I catch my breath for a moment as I wonder if this will be the day they find him.

"We are very close," she reports. "Will tomorrow be the day? I pray that it will."

But tomorrow is not the day. Nor the next. It goes on and on, still with no trace. Laura writes eloquently about her gratitude to those helping in the search, the kindness of strangers who offer food or shelter, her continued anguish. The guys following Nick's tracks have deduced that he was badly injured as he struggled down that mountain; he carefully stepped around bushes and rocks instead of taking his usual long strides. They see possible evidence that he bedded down, surviving his first night in the wild. What went wrong?

My mother's death in 2002 meant the sudden end to her letters from across the pond. She had settled in England as a refugee during the war and I was raised there, but I moved to California as an adult. We maintained a regular correspondence, those thin blue airmail envelopes arriving every three to four weeks. The letters seemed trivial and boring most of the time, but after her death, I missed them more than I ever could have imagined.

And after her death, I recalled with a new poignancy something my mother had mentioned once: the abrupt end to the letters from her own mother in Prague. It was wartime, 1940. She had no way to contact her mother, no way to know if she was okay. The war had erected an impenetrable wall of silence. No Facebook postings for her. Even an international phone call was out of the question. No way to quell the mounting fear about her mother and sister's fate.

Almost three months after Nick's disappearance, the trackers have reached an impasse. Early rains have obliterated his footprints. They can do no more with the human eye. They need a canine unit. There's a team of five dogs and five handlers in Wyoming who will volunteer their services, but more money is needed to bring them to California. The GoFundMe target is raised to \$35,000. I give another fifty dollars and watch the amazing power of social media as the green

fundraising gauge climbs again. I continue to watch for updates. There are bureaucratic obstacles that are hard to believe. The Sherriff's Office has to give approval for the dogs to be brought in but they won't answer the phone. There's some nonsense about crossing state lines.

But then they arrive! The dogs are here! They will get to work tomorrow.

Then nothing. No news.

Of course, there are other things going on in my life. The Giants are in the World Series and the Democrats are in danger of losing the Senate, and these are both things I care passionately about. I scurry off work early for the 5:00 p.m. first pitch. I donate to candidates in distant states. But every day, I think of Nick and those hunting for him.

There's an update three days later, but it's not encouraging. The dogs have shown some "interest" but nothing has materialized. I learn about the thermodynamics of air rising and falling and how that makes it difficult for the dogs to trace a scent. It's not as easy as it seems in the movies, we're told. One day, Laura announces that a team is going to continue searching through the night. She asks for prayers, for God to guide and protect them.

I'm glad that she has her faith to comfort her through this ordeal. But I don't understand her God. Never did. If He can guide and protect the searchers, why couldn't He—why wouldn't He—why didn't He—guide and protect Nick?

Another week passes and there's still no resolution, and most of the dogs have to leave. But wait! One of the handlers returns a week later with her dog Timber; the search is back on with renewed hopes of a swift conclusion. The coming together of strangers to help with this effort is inspiring. But it's hard for me to follow the details. Nick must have made it down even further, expanding the search area; but no—now there are new unspecified clues narrowing the area again. I'm losing focus.

The search is put on hold, and I'm beginning to think there will be no resolution, no happy ending. They may never find Nick's body. Perhaps his wife will never know exactly what

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In 2007, the International Tracing Service, in partnership with the Red Cross, the U.S. Holocaust Museum, and Yad Vashem in Israel, provided access to millions of records from the Nazis' vast archives in Bad Arolsen. Priority was given to survivors and their descendants. I launched into the documents with the zeal of a hunter. It was too late for my mother, but for her sake and in her memory, I was determined to solve the mystery of what had happened to her family. I filled out forms with all the details I could provide. I personally visited the museum in Washington, D.C. and met with the wonderful folks in the research department. I uncovered copies of my aunt's and grandmother's actual deportation records. Holding these in my hand gave me chills. They had been placed together on a transport from Terezín to Izbica in February 1942.

But then the trail went cold. There are no surviving records from Izbica. They might have been executed there or died of starvation or moved to Auschwitz and gassed. They may have died in 1942 or lingered on until 1944. They may have died together or separately. I still don't know.

The late November rains pound California and this is wonderful news for the drought, but I can't help thinking about the search for Nick. Surely this will put an end to it for the season. But no—there's a new effort, one last push. Some of the guys have re-examined all the evidence, scrutinized the aerial photographs, and charted all the possible tracks, the most likely exit routes, the places where the dogs showed interest, the direction of the wind at those times, sharing these with Search and Rescue experts from around the nation. They believe they have narrowed the search area to one small section. Some of the dogs can return. The logistical planning gears up yet again: transportation, food, sleeping quarters for this small army of volunteers. It's like a military operation on par with the hunt for Osama bin Laden.

But they don't get their trophy. A big storm defeats them and all efforts are suspended for the season. In one final end-of-year post, Laura reveals that they did find something in the narrow area of focus in the last few days, some remains, a few bones I guess. These are being sent off for DNA testing but it will be months before the results are available. And she plans to return in the spring to search for more evidence, more answers.

Surely there must be something, some clues. If they can find his backpack, wouldn't he have tried to leave a note? Something to explain what happened? Perhaps when someone is searching for something else, the vital clue might turn up. Like that watch of mine over fifty years ago.

But I realize sometimes there are no answers. The millions murdered in the Shoah; the *Desaparacidos* of Chile or Argentina; the thousands of victims of genocide in Armenia or Nigeria, murdered by perpetrators without the Nazis' macabre fondness for detailed records; the milk carton children kidnapped at bus stops and never seen again—all vanished with no trace, no explanation. How can anyone cope with this? How to make sense of it? Laura has her belief that somehow this must be part of God's plan. If that works for her, great, but I inherited my mother's skepticism. She always said that if God is omnipotent, He must be "a nasty piece of work"; if He's not omnipotent, then He can't be of much help.

There's another air disaster in Asia and I read of two families who were somehow delayed and missed the flight that crashed into the ocean. They thank God for saving them. But what does this mean for those who were on the plane? Are we supposed to believe that God had it in for them?

Life is precarious, that's all I know. I'm going to turn off the computer, walk away from Facebook, and ignore my email. I'm going to gather up my partner and my daughter and our bouncy terrier and go for a hike along the bluffs above the Pacific Ocean. I need to relish the joy of each moment.

Author's Note: "Missing" is a true story, but some of the names and identifying details have been altered to preserve anonymity.