

‘When someone is dead, you know they are dead... you get to have a eulogy, you put a lid on a coffin, they are buried, you know where they are. With missing, you get none of that’

When a person goes missing, families are left in a state of limbo, unable to grieve for a loved one who may or may not still be alive. We speak to four Irish families about the unanswered questions, making private details public property and taking steps to move on

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The last time Maria Dowling saw her brother Paul O'Donnell, he was in her house laughing at something one of her children said. It was 2018, and shortly afterwards he would go missing. He remains so to this day.

Every year, thousands of missing person reports are made to An Garda Síochána. The vast majority of these people are found – but some never return home. For the families of those who remain missing, they stay suspended in a state of what is described as ambiguous loss – a loss with no definite conclusion and no closure.

Paul was Maria's youngest brother, and she was very close to him. The now 61-year-old remembers leading him into the yard on his first day of school. When they were older, she recalls him jumping down a ladder, grabbing her hand, and praying together. She remembers his softness and his kindness.

When someone dies, we remember the person, but sadly, when someone is missing, that status can overshadow the person, the life they had and the people they loved.

"This was a loved, precious man who everyone tried to help. He was stubborn, he was very funny, he was very handsome, he was incredibly kind," Maria says, sitting back in an armchair in her north Dublin home.

"When [people] are missing, you don't get to say all this, you just have people going, 'Oh, I wonder what was wrong?' They become a category that has nothing to it."

Paul, who was 50 when he went missing, lived in Dublin's Clontarf. He was loved and supported by those around him, particularly his mother, his ex-partner and best friend Kathleen, and his daughter Noelle. Maria says he was a sensitive individual who had bipolar disorder.

One day in early February 2018, Maria called him and he didn't answer. She knew something was off. "He always picked up for me," she says.

Other family members were also having trouble contacting him. They searched his house and reported him missing. He had last been seen on February 9, 2018.

In the hours and days after a person goes missing, gardaí gather information, the level of risk is assessed, media alerts are issued, searches organised, and families try to gain an understanding of what has happened from the often limited clues available.

"This incredibly desperate need overtakes you. It's, 'I have got to find him, and urgently find him,'" says Maria, who works as a trauma counsellor.

Maria went through different possibilities. Had Paul taken cash and boarded a ferry? Had he fallen and injured himself? Had he been abducted? Had he taken his own life?

Maria started to search the coastline. While other beachgoers were trawling for cockles and razor clams, she was trying to find Paul.

"I am looking through seaweed for somebody, for my brother, because this cannot be the end. It cannot be, because we never said goodbye, I never said what I want to say to you, I need to see your face, I need to hear your voice. I have got to find you," she says.

Another day, after an unconfirmed sighting, she went searching near the Clontarf baths. It was a

freezing cold February afternoon, the light was fading and rain was pounding down. The tide started to come in, and as she returned to her car, the full breadth of the tragedy hit home.

"The full shock hit me as I watched the sea come in, fill up, and I thought, 'You are gone. You are gone.' And my best efforts are not enough to know where you are... And I wasn't able to put the key into the ignition."

The term 'ambiguous loss' was first coined by American social scientist Dr Pauline Boss, who worked with families of the physically missing during the Vietnam War, and the families of victims of 9/11.

When someone is missing, there are no concrete facts to confirm that the loss is forever, despite the person being physically absent.

"We're not even sure – is there a loss here?" Irish psychotherapist and grief specialist Liz Gleeson explains. "Is this a death? Are they going to come back? Am I allowed to grieve? We don't have our loss acknowledged. We don't have our feelings validated."

Every case of ambiguous loss is a unique trauma, and this means how people manage and live with it is individual.

In the months after Paul's disappearance, Maria felt stuck and in a "quandary of turmoil".

"When someone is dead, you know they are dead, you know how they died, you get to kiss them goodbye at a wake, you get to have a eulogy, you put a lid on a coffin, they are buried, you know where they are. With missing, you get none of that," she says.

"You are left never being able to resolve anything. And I think that's a trauma."

At times, the focus on Paul being missing made Maria feel "like I am missing too".

"I am so caught up in you being missing, I started feeling like I'm not really me now. I don't know if this makes sense but my connection to you being undefined and missing... means that in some ways I am quite changed and I don't know anything any more."

The sense of unknown is something Pauline Price has lived with for over a year. On January 14, 2025, her youngest son, Luke, went missing. He was 27 at the time.

Pauline remembers getting a call late in the evening from her elder son, Nathan. "It was absolute panic, white cold with worry... I could feel the life draining out of me with worry," the 61-year-old retired nurse recalls.

Luke was living in Portlaoise and had taken some annual leave and travelled to Limerick to see his girlfriend.

Pauline says he visited his girlfriend at her home on the Tuesday he went missing. She says he stood up to leave quite abruptly, then his girlfriend asked him to stay, speaking to him on the doorstep of her home. He started walking away, and by the time she had put on her shoes, Pauline says, he was gone.

"He vanished into the night," Pauline says. "There was no sign of him."

In the days afterwards, gardaí advised Pauline to remain in the family home in Offaly in case Luke returned there. Her husband, Dave, travelled to help in the search as she rang search and rescue, gardaí, her family and those out searching for Luke.

"It was three weeks before I left the house, and I only left the house when we got a reported sighting locally. Of course, I jumped in the car and drove like a bat out of hell."

It turned out to be a false alarm. It has now been over a year since Luke was last seen.

"I still expect to hear him come in, and say, 'What's



'Is this a death? Are they going to come back? Am I allowed to grieve? We don't have our loss acknowledged. We don't have our feelings validated'

all the fuss about?" she says.

Her hope is that he has simply gone on walkabout. "That he's off in the wilds of Co Clare, and that he's been adopted by some hippy commune, or even a religious commune, that they're helping him through it, whatever it is. That's what I've believed for a long time, but my belief in that is waning."

We meet in a hotel. She arrives carrying a folder with Luke's missing person posters, and photographs of him. As we go through them, she describes Luke as kind, gentlemanly, reserved, a deep thinker, a gamer. "He opened doors."

From his late teens, he suffered with anxiety – Pauline believes this might have been the result of a late diagnosis of dyslexia and dyspraxia.

Luke had a successful career. After school, he achieved a Fetac Level 5 qualification in culinary arts, before moving to the UK and working in kitchens there, and later in Ireland.

The months leading up to his disappearance had been a difficult time for Pauline. In March 2024, she was diagnosed with cancer. Before undergoing surgery, she told her sons about her diagnosis. She believes that Luke found it difficult to process.

"It undid Luke, and I knew that I shouldn't have told him the minute I told him. But you can't un-tell somebody. And then I had confirmation of it [after he went missing]. I was going through his Messenger account with one of his friends. [It said], 'Mum's had cancer. She's had big surgery, but she's all right now. It's done something to my mind'... That wasn't very nice for me."

When someone you love goes missing, family history and relationships go from being intensely personal to public. You appeal to everyone, asking for help, sightings or clues. Pauline gave interviews to



Patrick Collins, whose sister Sandra was murdered in 2000

Left: Maria Dowling's brother Paul O'Donnell, who went missing in 2018

newspapers and radio stations.

Doing so increases awareness of the case, which is a good thing. But being so open about a trauma that is so raw and deeply intimate can leave people feeling exhausted and exposed. Even telling someone a family member is missing can lead to a line of questioning that does not occur when someone has died.

Maria Dowling says it feels as if everyone becomes "immediately in my world, the world of my family, the world of my brother".

"There are people who went, 'Oh wow, I wonder what was going on there?' If someone is missing... [people ask], 'Were they depressed? What made them depressed? Why did they not want to live any more?' And they have a perception of you and your world. You can see it in their eyes."

Pauline Price refers to misguided attempts to cheer her up, toxic positivity and how unhelpful and distressing it can be.

"I don't have to cope, sorry. And if I don't want to cope, it's fine," she says.

She says she feels angry about the situation, about "not being heard".

The past year, she says, has devastated her. "There's no end in sight, because even if we find Luke, the innocence that we had before his disappearance has gone. We're never going to have that back. We're never going to be the same people. Luke's not going to be the same person, if indeed he ever does come back. You know, we'll always be watching. We'll always be wondering, 'Is it going to happen again?'" At the family home, Luke's possessions are boxed up in rooms and the attic.

Pauline wears a gold ring on her finger that belonged to him, and says she sometimes walks into

the rooms and looks at all his belongings. "Sometimes it will cheer me up, other times it will make me cry, and other times I'm just like, 'This stuff's really annoying me. Come home. Sort it out!'"

She feels sad that she can't phone him and tell him good news, such as the fact that one year after her cancer diagnosis, she is doing well. But most of all, she is sad because she desperately misses her son and wants him back.

JP Grealis was 24 when he disappeared in Breda, a city in the south of the Netherlands, in October 2008.

"It consumed every part of me," his sister Helen, who is 44, recalls. "I began investigating everything possible. I was looking at every avenue. And my partner at the time, he supported me along the way. But at times, I appeared quite crazy to him, because that's all I was ever doing. It impacts you everywhere, because all you can focus on is that. You can't sleep." JP had moved to the Netherlands in 2007 to work as a labourer and carpenter. He was close to his family and would call them all the time.

Helen remembers summers together playing outdoors. She used to remind him when they were children that she was "two years, five months, nine days and five hours older" than him to gain the upper hand in arguments.

On the Friday before he went missing, he had finished a job in Eindhoven, and he moved back to Breda on Sunday. By Thursday, he was missing.

His family travelled over as soon as they could and began searching, figuring out his final moments, retracing his steps, appealing for information. But no information about his whereabouts came to light.

The family took the Dutch police to court over their handling of the case in 2013 but lost. Over the years, they have tried everything to highlight JP's story in the hope of finding him. In 2012, they staged a walk to the Dutch Embassy in Ireland, spent months chasing leads, explored other towns that JP had visited during his time there, and hired private investigators.

In 2015, JP's mother died. It was around this time that Helen started to come to the realisation that JP might never be found.

"I have great faith," she says. "[I thought] mum was going to get up there and send him home."

When this didn't happen, she started to consider that "maybe we're never going to get him... I think some days it would take a miracle at this stage, after all we've done."

For her, there is one defining trait to ambiguous loss.

"I suppose it's different as we have nowhere to go to visit. That's all physical stuff. But from an emotional perspective, I think it's guilt. It's a huge amount of guilt that we couldn't find him. I carry guilt and I tried so hard to find him."

Becoming a mother has also made her more aware of the torment her late mother and father went through.

"I really don't know how they got through their days with this," she says.

Her belief is that JP came across the wrong crowd and there was foul play -- although there is no evidence of this. She hopes that they will at some stage find out what happened to him.

"I don't like to be seen as a victim. We aren't the victims. We're suffering a loss here. We have to deal with it, but we don't want to be seen as the victims. It's JP that's the victim. Something's happened to him."

Patrick Collins's sister Sandra was considered a missing person when she disappeared from Killala in Co Mayo in December 2000. For years, her family held hope that she was alive and they would see her again.

Sandra, who was 28 at the time, disappeared the same week that 22-year-old Trevor Deely went missing after a Christmas party in Dublin. Patrick's mother Eleanor used to wonder if the two "had run away together".

In 2010, gardaí officially upgraded the case to a murder inquiry. Until that point, the family lived in hope that she was still out there alive.

"I was hoping she was alive but that brought its own set of questions," says Patrick, who was 13 at the time of her disappearance.

"Why would she do this? When would she come back? If we met each other again, how would I... because you would be upset naturally and a little bit angry with her for putting us all through this. We are only human. I was thinking, 'What is the scenario that we are going to be reunited with you, and how are we going to feel?'"

Patrick, who is 39, says when he found out she had been murdered, it was devastating.

"I was angry, and asked who could have done something like this to my sister. And how did she die? Was she strangled? Did she fight back? Was she screaming? Was she calling out for help, and no one could hear her?"

"But it was also a release. It was like, 'Oh my god, at least the always wondering if she was dead or alive was over. There was a finality to it, it was the answer we didn't want. [The answer we wanted] was that she would come home... and build more memories. When I heard she was dead, we knew we would never see her the way we wanted to - alive and happy and in the heart of the family."

In May 2014, a person went on trial for her murder. Ruling that there was not sufficient evidence to find him guilty, Justice Patrick McCarthy directed the jury to acquit.

The family have still not found her, and not knowing where her body is, Patrick says, is "the closest thing to hell".

"It's like you can't breathe," he says of living with a loved one who remains unfound.

"I feel like I am living underwater, and it's hard to



breathe at times. I can carry on, I can eat, and I can talk and do all the things, but I can't really be the full me."

He sometimes wonders how different a person he would be if this family tragedy had not occurred. When a person goes missing, you not only lose someone close to you, but your family identity shifts.

"We are Sandra's brothers and sisters, [and that] takes its toll. Our anonymity from the general public is gone," he says. "Everybody knows everything... the privacy of her life and everything is all gone. People asking you questions. 'Why did she do that?' Obviously it is part of the story, and we want to get her back, but to have to go through all this on top of the trauma and the pain of not knowing."

He hopes that will find Sandra eventually and give her the Christian burial she deserves. "And give us the closure we need. We need our closure. We need our peace."

According to grief expert Liz Gleeson, living with

ambiguous loss is learning to live with the devastation, and the unknown.

"It's learning to live with ambiguity. Like any loss, we are forced to rebuild our lives around the loss... people with ambiguous loss fear that if I rebuild, does it look like I stopped looking, or I don't care."

She advises people to give themselves permission to rebuild their life while also acknowledging their loss. "Your loss is there, and the ambiguity is there, but I have also built other factors into my life that make my life worth living, and that make me feel glad to be alive."

In Howth, after months of searching, Maria Dowling decided to confront her grief. To go, she says, "beyond missing" and "unshackle myself from the official confines of 'missing' and the constant reminder that I have no evidence to inform me of what became of my brother".

"I had to allow myself permission to examine what I held about the key questions that are the torture of every person who has had a loved one disappear."

These questions she asked herself were: What does she believe happened to Paul? Does she believe he is dead? Where does she think he is? "I thought... I can't be in abeyance, I can't be floating around any more. What do I know in my soul? And that's all I have got because you are not here and I have no facts. And I just thought on balance of probabilities, he couldn't live any more. Life was stretching out in front of you and you couldn't tolerate it. I think you took your life. And that was utterly destroying of me. I wasn't fit to function but I let it flood through."

She had to face "the agony of... he's not coming back and all the unsaid and the undones. I had to go into a grief process that quite frankly nearly broke me in half."

But she feels this process helped her become "unstuck".

"I no longer feel the need to find him. I am free to live again, free to emerge out of the agony of the not knowing. I am free to smile again, even laugh. Paul would want that, so I am not betraying him. I am not leaving him behind. I am not letting go."



Helen Grealis, whose brother JP (inset) went missing in the Netherlands in 2008; and (above) Pauline Price, whose son Luke has been missing since 2025