

“ONE YEAR ON FROM MH370, I STILL BELIEVE MY MUM IS ALIVE”



On 8 March, it will be one year since Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 went missing en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. No trace of it has been found. *Stylist* speaks to Grace Subathirai, 27, whose mother, Anne Daisy, was on the plane

AS TOLD TO: LIZZIE POOK

“ If my mum walked through the door of our family home in Kuala Lumpur tomorrow, she'd see that nothing has changed since she left. Everything she loves is still here; her clothes still hang in her wardrobe, her ornaments are still dotted around the living room, her plants are still alive in their pots, even though she isn't around to care for them.

It's been almost a year since my mum stepped aboard MH370, a Malaysia Airlines flight which would lose contact with air traffic control and military radars less than 60 minutes into its six-hour journey from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. Since then, extensive underwater searches and air crash investigations haven't found a single clue to its whereabouts. Hundreds of explanations for its disappearance have been put forward, from terrorist hijackings to island landings. But in January, the Malaysian government officially declared the disappearance an 'accident', meaning that the 239 people on board, including my mother, are presumed dead and the plane presumed to have crashed in the southern Indian Ocean. But the fact is we still have no answers, and until we have concrete evidence to suggest otherwise, I will still believe my mother is alive.

I'd always been close to my mum, as has my sister Azelia, 22. Even though I've lived mostly in England for the last couple of years, I spoke to her on the phone every day, sometimes for hours. She was such a homely person; she gave up everything – her social life, her hobbies, her time, effort and energy – to give us the best. I admired the fact that she was always so cheerful. She was a tiny person, barely five foot tall, but so strong. She held our family together through all sorts of stormy weather. That day, she was travelling to visit my father in Beijing, where he works. It was the third time she had made that trip.

I remember talking to her on the phone before she left the house for the airport. Everything

seemed normal. She said how excited she was to see my dad and how she was looking forward to a good break. I told her not to forget about me while she was out there and to remember to call me every day. The last words she said to me were, 'I love you very much.' I'm so glad I said, 'I love you too.' Because I listen to her last words play over and over in my head every single day.

I first knew something was wrong when I got a phone call from my dad at about 1am on the Saturday morning. I was studying law in Bristol at that point and was in the middle of my final exams. At first I thought he was calling to tell me mum had arrived safe and well, like he normally would. But instead he just said, 'When's your next exam?' When I told him it was Monday, he hesitated and hung up. Within minutes he called me back and ordered me to get the next flight home. He said something had

to find out what was going on. Anything could have happened and I wouldn't have known.

WAITING FOR NEWS

When I landed, a Malaysia Airlines official met me from the plane. I asked him over and over again if there was any news but there was none. That, to me, felt like a sort of relief. If he'd told me they'd found the plane and everyone had died, that would have been worse. This way, there was still a chance they could have survived. I was hoping for the best, clutching my phone expecting my mum

the news. We had been assigned a 'caregiver' by Malaysia Airlines, who was supposed to relay any important information to us but we rarely heard from them. Instead, we got all our information via the televised press conferences that were held by Malaysia Airlines and the government several times a day.

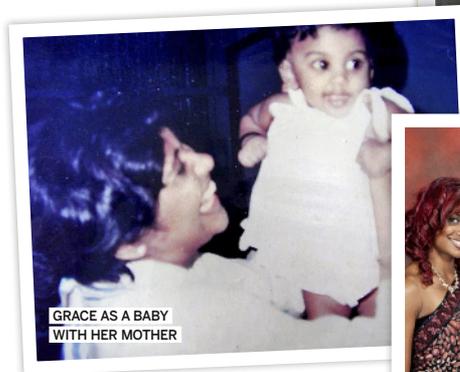
The house was busy with family and friends who came to lend their support. Malaysia was suffering frequent water cuts at the time due to a long drought, but my mum had stocked up on a huge amount of bottled water. There was not only enough for us, but also the many well-wishers who visited our home – it felt like she was caring for us even though she wasn't there. She had also cooked and packed away several days of meals for our two dogs. It was comforting to feel like she was still feeding them as well.

I spent those days in tears, desperate for any indication of what had happened to my mum, trying with all my strength not to let myself imagine what could have happened in those last

moments. I found a lot of comfort in reading her bible. As I flipped through it, I found photos of all of us sandwiched between the pages and Post-it notes she'd written to herself to remind her to pray for our exams or competitions.

Gradually, over the next couple of weeks, the news conferences started being held three times a day,

then once a day and, ultimately, my mum and the other missing passengers began to slip out of the news agenda. The situation started to feel a bit hopeless after that. We continued to fast – eating only one meal a day – as part of our prayer, but after three weeks I returned to England to continue my studies and my dad went back to Beijing. It was incredibly hard, but it was clear we were doing ourselves no favours by being stagnant. As well as depressed and anxious, I was also confused. I felt I should be grieving but was fighting against it, convincing myself my mother wasn't dead and they'd find the plane soon. I remember driving to and from my work



happened to mum's plane, but they weren't sure what yet, and that I wasn't to ask any questions but to fly back to Kuala Lumpur immediately.

Panicking, I got the first coach out of Bristol to Heathrow at 5am. I was in shock and cried for the entire journey, typing 'MH370' into Google on my phone and refreshing it constantly, desperate for updates. There were so many rumours flying around – that the plane had crashed or been deliberately diverted by someone on board. People had even uploaded pictures of dead bodies floating in the water on social media, claiming they were those on the plane. The flight to Kuala Lumpur was agony – those were the worst 15 hours of my life. I couldn't access the internet

to get in touch at any moment.

My dad met me at the airport, having flown in from Beijing, and we went straight to the hotel where Malaysia Airlines had gathered friends and family of those aboard the flight. It was chaos; there were distraught relatives everywhere, we weren't able to get hold of any information and news teams were hanging around, jostling for stories. We didn't want to be around anyone else. We decided it would be less traumatic to wait for information back at the family home, so we left our contact details and told staff to call us if there was any news.

From that moment, and for the next three weeks, I didn't leave the house. I was glued to

placement every day, thinking I could bury my emotions, but then realising I had tears rolling down my face.

Four months after the flight's disappearance, news reached us that another Malaysia Airlines flight, MH17, had crashed after being shot down over Ukraine. It was like experiencing the worst kind of post-traumatic stress. Seeing scenes on the news of plane wreckage and bodies being loaded onto trains gave me nightmares every night. In my dreams, I'd see bloated corpses being pulled out of the ocean. You might be able to block the images from your mind during the day but they're always there in your subconscious, ready to come back to haunt you. More recently when AirAsia flight QZ8501 went missing on 28 December, all my worst fears came rushing back. I remember being in church when I heard about it. It felt like a shockwave through my soul. I had to go to the toilet because I was hyperventilating; I thought I was going to faint.

LOOKING FORWARD

A year on, I've graduated from my law course and I've since moved

back to Kuala Lumpur to work as a lawyer. But things haven't been much easier here. The flight is still the first thing I think about in the morning and the last thing I think about before I go to sleep. My dad is now back in Beijing full-time and my sister is studying in England, so I'm alone in the family home for the most part, which can be quite lonely. I want to carry on with my life but it's difficult to behave normally with other people because there's so much going on inside my head.

"I WANT TO CLOSE THIS CHAPTER AND MOVE ON BUT I CAN'T DO THAT UNTIL WE GET ANSWERS"

Work keeps me occupied and at the weekend I try and keep busy doing housework or walking the dogs, and I have a couple of close friends who I meet up with. I also do a little bit of art. But honestly, I'm just trying to fill my time. If I didn't do anything my mind would wander. I feel like I'm stuck. I can't move forward because I just don't know how.

But it has been helpful talking to the other families involved. We're all over the world from China to New Zealand, but we

keep in touch via Facebook and WhatsApp and everyone has been really supportive. It feels very much like the world wants us to move on; they get tired of seeing us in turmoil and they think, 'Isn't it about time you just let it go?' They may not say it, but you can see it in the way they act around you. But the hardest thing for my family is not having any closure. How can we grieve? I want to close this chapter and move on but I can't do that until we get answers

– not with something of this magnitude, with someone we love so much.

I still pray for my mum every day. I send her messages on WhatsApp – telling her how my day was, asking for advice, saying that I love her and miss her. To the world, it's been 365 days, but to us, it's been an eternity. We haven't had a funeral service and I'd say this is true of 90% of the families involved. We still don't want to believe that our loved ones are dead, not without

evidence. We are ready and prepared to accept the worst, but only when there is solid proof.

We have no idea why the plane veered off course, we still don't know for sure what direction it went. The authorities are telling us the plane crashed in the Indian Ocean, but they haven't found a shred of evidence to suggest that's the case. A lot of the conspiracy theories are preferable to what we're being told now. However, I'd rather not dwell on something I can't prove either way because I don't want to give myself a false sense of hope. But I also don't want to take away any belief either. I will try hard to be as neutral as I can under the circumstances. But without a piece of wreckage, or any floating objects, there's nothing concrete to say they've gone. We still have hope.

Talking about my mum is incredibly hard, but it's the only way to keep the search alive and get some answers. The Malaysian government needs to feel the pressure of public interest so that my mum and the 238 other people who were on board that plane aren't forgotten forever."



MH370 – A TIMELINE OF EVENTS

The disappearance of MH370 remains a mystery; here's what we do know



8 MARCH 2014: MH370, carrying 12 crew and 227 passengers, departs Kuala Lumpur at 12.41am local time (4.41pm GMT, 7 March), due to land in Beijing at 6.30am.

1.07AM (LOCAL TIME): The last digital transmission is sent via the plane's computers to computers on the ground; the expected 1.37am transmission is never sent.

1.19AM: Last voice contact with ground. The pilot or co-pilot says, "Goodnight Malaysian three seven zero." Unusually, the plane's transponder is manually shut down.

2.15AM: Malaysian military trace MH370 west to the Strait of Malacca. Thai military confirm the plane turned west off course then north over the Andaman Sea.

2.28AM: Radar is lost but seven automatic 'pings' are picked up via a satellite above the Indian Ocean. Experts calculate two possible routes the plane has flown in.

7.24AM: A multinational search begins in the Gulf of Thailand and South China Sea, where the flight's signal was lost, soon extended to the Strait of Malacca and Andaman Sea.



24 MARCH: The Malaysian government – noting the final satellite location is too far from any landing site – concludes 'beyond doubt' that MH370 went down in the Indian Ocean.

MARCH – 4 SEPTEMBER 2014: Search continues in the southern Indian Ocean while various conspiracy theories build – including pilot suicide and terrorist hijackings.

5 SEPTEMBER 2014 – PRESENT: The next phase of the search begins: an examination of the seafloor about 1,800km west of Perth, Australia, expected to last up to 12 months.

29 JANUARY 2015: The Malaysian government officially declares flight MH370 an 'accident', with all 239 people on board presumed dead.