

# TIMES ONLINE

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## **Madeleine: one fact, many lies, endless grief**

**It's now 124 days since Madeleine McCann disappeared. Our correspondent charts a story that became global, lurid and often invented – and hears how the McCanns learnt to think positively after imagining the darkest scenarios and suffering uncontrollable grief**



Penny Wark

This is the story that has preoccupied at least two nations and elicited sympathy around the world. It is now 124 days old and has been told thousands of times in millions of words. Yet the story has only one fact: on the evening of May 3, a three-year-old child, Madeleine McCann, disappeared from the bedroom where she slept. We may think we know more than that, but we don't, and no matter how often the story is repeated and the sole fact is spun, all we are reading is speculation. Or slurs and lies. There have been plenty of those, too, because when the media run out of facts and speculation, their more unscrupulous exponents resort to invention.

It's not pretty. A story that was always tragic and has yet to have any kind of resolution, let alone a happy ending, is being treated with the abandon more normally meted out to soap opera characters or to those who elect to engage with the manufactured world of reality TV. The difference is that Madeleine is neither fictional nor a wannabe star, and neither are her parents, Gerry and Kate, who, you will note, don't need a surname any more. We know them that well, or we think we do. Note, too, that referring to them as Gerry and Kate breaks the convention of referring to them as Kate and Gerry: when feeding the masses a tale of heartbreak the distraught mother is a more emotive presence than an anguished father.

There is no doubt that Madeleine's disappearance – and what has happened since – raises important questions about how we can best protect our children from those who wish them harm, about the obligations of the media, and about our responses to the pain of people we don't know. During the past three weeks I've examined these questions in Praia da Luz, the sunny whitewashed family idyll on the Algarve where I met the McCanns, and elsewhere.

As everyone is acutely aware, the reason we know so little about Madeleine's disappearance is because she was abducted in Portugal, where the *segredo de justiça* law prevents the police from putting information about a criminal investigation in the public domain. Had Madeleine disappeared in Britain or the US, this would not have happened. Given that the Portuguese police admit that after four months they still have no idea where she is, or whether she is alive or dead, the first question has to be whether the lack of information is merely frustrating, and especially so for her parents, or whether it has impeded her safe recovery.

Neil Thompson has 30 years of police experience, latterly as a detective superintendent in charge of operations for the UK's National Crime Squad. Now the director of security at red24, a private security company, he does not support the Portuguese tactic. "If a child is abducted for sexual exploitation or murder, no information is unhelpful," he says bleakly. "In the UK you would release information to the media and the public that could help the situation, and keep back anything that might compromise the investigation, or frighten the perpetrator into harming the child. It's a balancing act. Your priority is to get the victim back alive, arresting the perpetrator is lower down the scale. A no-information rule means that you're working in the dark.

"The first two to three hours are vital. The first officer at the scene secures it and calls in detectives. A good officer has a nose for these things, and you have a process that tells you when a child has not wandered off. You set up road blocks, you check ports, you check intelligence – has anyone tried to snatch a child in the area? Can anyone describe a car? All that is fed into an incident room and analysed and the senior information officer decides what to release to the public. In the UK police can get a newsflash out straight away to TV and radio so you've got thousands of eyes and ears right at the beginning and you tell the public what you want them to look for. If you do that 24 or 48 hours later it loses impact."

We don't know exactly when Madeline was reported missing, and I am told that none of the published timelines relating to May 3 are accurate. I have also learned that the Portuguese response system is slow and unwieldy. The McCanns' call to the police was received in Portimão, a 30-minute drive away, and the practice is for a local officer to attend the scene to assess whether a crime has been committed and whether to call for help. Police officers drove to apartment 5A at the Ocean Club where the McCanns were staying, then referred the case to the Policia Judiciaria in Portimão. Thus vital time was lost immediately after Madeleine's disappearance – when it was imperative that the investigation should become active.

“You’re only as good as your expertise,” Thompson says. “If you’re in a country that hasn’t got a lot of serious crime and the training hasn’t gone into major investigations, you make mistakes and lose evidence.” Abductions are rare but not random, he adds. “Most child abductions are planned; it’s not a burglar who finds a child and takes it. Paedophiles go to places where there are children, such as Disney World. Whatever this abductor’s motive, he has been in the vicinity, he knows that there are children in this complex and that when people are on holiday they’re relaxed, and don’t think about risk. He will know the area and will have planned what he is going to do with the child. If he’s going to keep the child in a secure room, he will have been careful not to alert shopkeepers by buying food he wouldn’t normally buy. If a child is going to be sold for exploitation, in this case the unprecedented scale of the publicity has given the abductor a problem because he has an item that is readily identifiable all over the world and can’t be passed on.”

Those who specialise in tracing missing children acknowledge that publicity can unnerve a perpetrator, but insist that it is key and does save lives. “We know the public helps us to find missing children and it’s up to law enforcement officers on each case to make the call as to what they tell the public,” says Nancy McBride, the national safety director at the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which has recovered 110,276 (just over 86 per cent) of the 127,737 children reported missing to it since 1984. “There’s always a risk, but it’s worth it. We never give up, we never close a case until we know what’s happened to a child.”

In seeking publicity, the McCanns had the clear objective of finding their daughter. What they did not envisage was that interest would spread, as Gerry puts it, like a forest fire, and that 150 journalists would suddenly descend on Praia da Luz, excited by the prospect of a story of a pretty child with attractive parents who are also middle class and intelligent – and far away from the stereotypical image of an inadequate single mother who might carelessly mislay a child and who certainly couldn’t afford to visit this aspirational resort. Add to that the parents’ status as doctors, people who save lives, yet who leave their children, Madeleine and her two-year-old twin siblings, without adult supervision in an apartment while they eat at a tapas bar a 52-second walk away, and the chattering classes are simultaneously full of sympathy and hooked.

When you first see apartment 5A you are struck by its exposed location. On the ground floor of a five-storey block, it is on a street corner and, like most of the Ocean Club apartments, not part of the gated section that houses the tapas bar and crèche. It would be easy to observe from different viewpoints, and perhaps to notice that this family had a regular pattern of behaviour in the evening, putting their children to bed, slipping across to the tapas bar and checking on them regularly.

But these are observations made with the benefit of bitter hindsight. Before Madeleine became a household name, no one thought like that on holiday, especially in an English-speaking resort so sedate that it doesn’t even have facilities for teenagers. In late April the weather is pleasant, the beach is a five-minute walk away and you’re there to relax and have fun. “It’s a quiet, safe resort,” says Gerry when we meet in a borrowed flat. “The

distance from the apartment to the restaurant was 50 yards. We dined in the open-air bit and you can actually see the veranda of the apartment. It's difficult because if you are [at home] cutting grass in the back with the mower, and that takes me about half an hour, and the children are upstairs in a bedroom, you'd never bat an eyelid. That's similar to how we felt. We've been unfortunately proved wrong, out of the blue. It's shattered everything."

"Everyone I know who had been to Portugal with their children said it was very family friendly, and it did feel like that," says Kate. "If I'd had to think for one second about it, it wouldn't have happened. I never even had to think like that, to make the decision. It felt so safe that I didn't even have to – I mean, I don't think we took a risk. If I put the children in the car the chances of having an accident would be greater than somebody coming in, breaking into your apartment and lifting a child out of her bed. But you never think, I shouldn't put the children in the car."

This is the first time that the McCanns have confirmed that the apartment was broken into. This information does not compromise Madeleine's safety, and rules out one of the numerous red herring theories that the police have explored, that Madeleine wandered away on her own. There is no logic in withholding it from the public.

"I have no doubt in my mind that she was taken by somebody from the room," says Kate. "We don't know if it was one person, two, or if it was a group of people, but I know she was taken."

"There's still hope because we don't know who's taken her, we don't know where they've taken her and we certainly don't know where she is," says Gerry. "The first time I spoke to Ernie Allen, the chief executive of the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children in the States, he said what I wanted to hear, and they've got enough experience of getting children back after long periods of time still to remain hopeful, and their own experience is that the younger the child, the less likelihood of serious harm. Don't get me wrong, we're not blinkered. The scenario that everyone thinks about is that a paedophile took her to abuse her and if that is the situation then statistically the chances are they would kill her. But we don't know that and that's the difficulty we're dealing with. There are a range of scenarios and we want every single avenue explored because they're all pretty rare. That doesn't mean they should be represented in front page headlines as if all of them are likely, because they're not."

Does the Portuguese insistence that no information can be given about the investigation have any advantages? "For us, not having any information is very difficult," Kate replies. "For us as parents it's beneficial having information. We know that from our own jobs – the main complaint from patients' families is lack of communication and not being informed. It's detrimental."

Of course the McCanns' bid for information from the public, unsupported by details of the abduction, had already been hamstrung by the investigation's slow start. There was also a language barrier. They now have phone access to a police officer who speaks

English, but contact is variable, they say. You sense that they are often in situations where they would like to be forthright, but are obliged to keep their thoughts to themselves. “It is frustrating,” says Kate. “The whole situation makes you angry, that’s part of the whole grief that something like this has happened to Madeleine and to us. They’re all normal emotions and sometimes you do just want to explode.”

The McCanns sit on a sofa, Kate bone-thin – although I am told that she is very fit – extremely shy and modest, Gerry composed and easier to read. At the beginning of our interview Kate holds Madeleine’s pink toy cat in one hand and clutches her husband’s with the other. Kate’s face looks so tense and agonised that you might think that she was about to be tortured, and she seems to shrink into herself.

But as the hour passes she relaxes, takes her hand out of her husband’s and even laughs at some of the absurdities of their situation, recalling a day on the beach when she was on the phone to a friend and suddenly found herself being covered in kisses by a group of Portuguese matrons. Were this couple not wrapped up in this extraordinary event they would be unremarkable, the husband an assured man who likes to be in control, the wife a family-orientated mother who enjoys her job and still has friends from when she was 4.

Both are from working-class backgrounds: Gerry is the youngest of five children of an Irish matriarch and her joiner husband who brought up their family in Dumbarton, near Glasgow; Kate the only child of a Liverpool joiner and a civil servant. They met as junior doctors in Glasgow 12 years ago, got together as they travelled in New Zealand and she trained as an anaesthetist before retraining as a GP because, as two hospital doctors, they rarely saw each other.

In the immediate aftermath of Madeleine’s disappearance the McCanns found solace in their Catholic faith and were grateful for the warmth and care that greeted them at the Nossa Senhora da Luz church, a tiny, beautiful and peaceful sanctuary that forms a focal point for the community. “I felt cosseted,” Gerry says. “We felt so fragile and vulnerable. People kept saying ‘you’ll get her back’. It was what we needed to hear because we just had the blackest and darkest thoughts in the first 24, 36 hours, as if Madeleine had died. It was almost uncontrollable grief.

“The psychologist who came out to help us [Alan Pike from the Centre for Crisis Psychology in Skipton] was very good at turning our thought processes away from speculation. OK, there’s probabilities, but you don’t know that and he was very good at challenging the negatives. He was very much, ‘You will feel better after each thing that you take control of, even simple things’. We were surrounded by the Ambassador, the consul, PR crisis management, police, and he was saying ‘The decisions are yours’.”

“All these people we were meeting had to be there, and I felt so out of control and I found it quite scary,” says Kate. “I felt as if I’d been pushed into another world. Alan was saying, ‘There are little things you can take control of’.”

“For example,” says Gerry, “if you are asked ‘Do you want a cup of tea?,’ instead of saying ‘Mmm’, make a positive decision. Decide what you want. That combination of the Church, the community and the psychology helped very quickly. We agreed to interact because we thought it would probably help the search and it would be easier than hiding. Stay in the dark and you’re an enigma. There wasn’t anything to hide and in the first few weeks we were shown a lot of respect.”

The launch of the Find Madeleine campaign brought them more respect for their organisational skills. Friends and family rallied, a strategy was worked out, the media were fed pictures and quotes, and big businesses, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Beckham and numerous unknown individuals responded with support and donations. This money – the fund now stands at more than £1 million – enabled them to appoint a campaign manager and to publicise Madeleine’s disappearance by visiting other countries. With the possible exception of their blessing by the Pope at the Vatican, which was the brainwave of a tabloid newspaper and seemed to contradict the McCanns’ status as ordinary people, they were beyond reproach as campaigners, particularly as they began to engage with agencies that have expertise in recovering missing children. The story rolled along nicely, filling more front pages than any other event since the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, though not because the McCanns were managing the media, but because there was increasing evidence that Madeleine sells papers.

Then things started to go wrong. By the end of the second week of August, when the McCanns marked the 100th day since Madeleine’s disappearance by launching a YouTube initiative to help to find missing children, the Portuguese media had suggested that the McCanns could have killed their daughter, and the British press was not shy about repeating and even revelling in the “monstrous slurs”. Coincidentally that was the week I first visited Praia da Luz: there were nine television satellite trucks, each with a noisy generator, on the road outside apartment 5A, and the Portuguese crews were threatening to move outside the McCanns’ rented villa and had to be pacified with an interview. The Ocean Club asked the McCanns to stop bringing the twins to the kids’ club because other guests had complained about the media presence, and a couple of chain-smoking security men appeared outside reception. Praia da Luz, once a sardine-fishing community, now a manufactured resort with a reputation for guaranteeing uneventful and sunny family holidays, was becoming ugly.

The solicitor of Robert Murat, the only person to have been named by police as a suspect in the Madeleine investigation, didn’t help matters when he announced that business in Praia da Luz was suffering and that people there wanted “those bloody McCanns to go home”. However strong a news line this was, it wasn’t entirely true. Some shopkeepers continued to display posters appealing for information about Madeleine, others spoke tactfully about their sympathy for the McCanns. “It’s not that we want the McCanns to go home, it’s just that we want the bad feeling to go away,” said one café owner, who declined to be named. “Last year you had to book three weeks ahead to get in here in the evening, now you don’t need to book. Praia da Luz has become the place where you lose your children. It’s terribly sad, and it’s terrible for the McCanns.”

Something else was happening, too, that wasn't entirely edifying. At the church a steady stream of Portuguese worshippers and tourists approached the shrine to Madeleine to the left of the altar, and many were devout and respectful. Others nipped in to take a quick picture of the shrine and left without a bow of the head; after all, it's not every year that you go on holiday and find yourself in the presence of a moment so big that it is being recorded by television cameras.

Outside Robert Murat's home, which could not be seen from the road because of a deep and dense hedge, a Portuguese tourist checked with me that she had the right house, then stuffed herself into the hedge to get a proper look. (She was obviously not the first to do so, as sections of the hedge are now dying.) A hundred yards away sight-seers posed for photographs alongside the television crews positioned with 5A in the background.

On a seat overlooking the beach, Martin Payne, a well-meaning hairdresser from Stratford-upon-Avon, displayed an intriguing mixture of sympathy and fascination. He had just spotted Gerry in his Renault Scenic (which was more than I had at this stage; the McCanns are impossible to get near unless their campaign manager vets and approves you) and was happy to volunteer every known fact about the McCanns, and to speculate, in detail, on what might have happened to Madeleine.

"You've been reading too many books, Martin," said his wife. "I feel the same way that I felt when Princess Diana was killed," Martin said. "Such a loss to a lovely family. We want to have a conclusion to this."

When I suggest to the McCanns that some of the interest in them borders on the prurient, they seem to be unaware of it. At church they register the crowd outside as kindly support, and don't notice those on the fringes who are there just to spot them. In other contexts their unsought fame appals them. "We feel totally exposed, as though we have been stripped bare," says Kate.

They tend not to pick up the more sickly nuances within the press, because they don't read it; instead the campaign team (which consists of the full-time lobbyist the McCanns hired after the fund was set up, plus two other part-timers who ensure seven-day-a-week cover to field the innumerable media inquiries) shows them what they need to see, including translations of Portuguese coverage. And as they demonstrated last week with the announcement that they are to take legal action against the Portuguese newspaper *Tal e Qual*, for its allegation that they killed Madeleine with an overdose of sedatives, they will no longer tolerate lurid claims that defame them.

"We had no illusions that we could control the media," says Gerry. "The way that information has got out has been handled incredibly badly, without a doubt. It's almost as though some people are thinking out loud. It's all very well to have a potential scenario but that shouldn't necessarily be written up as if there is evidence to support it. I think this has been handled very irresponsibly by a number of people. We don't believe there is any evidence to support any of the deluded headlines, and the police have made that clear."

“There are times when you just want to shout out ‘That’s wrong’, because I think we’ve been done injustice in a lot of ways,” says Kate.

“There’s a blacker picture painted than what is true,” says Gerry, “whether it is how much we were drinking, which was a gross exaggeration, or how often we were checking. We know what we did and we are very responsible. It’s bad enough for us to have to deal with the fact that someone saw an opportunity – to then have elements sneering at your behaviour and making it look much worse than it was. It’s difficult because a lot of untruths, half truths and blatant lies have been published. It was published that we had 14 bottles of wine.”

“In an hour between us,” interjects Kate. “I’d have been impressed with that in my student days. Not only that, they qualify it by saying eight bottles of red and six of white, as though it gives it more credibility. You just want to scream.”

Where do the Portuguese media get their information? Brendan de Beer, the editor of the English language *Portugal News*, is the only journalist to have spoken at length to Chief Inspector Olegário Sousa, the spokesman for the Polícia Judiciária on the Madeleine investigation. Sousa, who has 20 years’ service and has previously focused on crimes relating to works of art, armed robberies and car-jacking, suggested that some information is being inadvertently leaked by officers at informal lunches with friends. De Beer is more specific and suggests that some of the more incongruous claims are no more than gossip.

Some of the police detectives involved in the case have spoken off the record, he says, and journalists have contacts within the police just as they do in Britain. “I’ve spoken to a couple of them [police officers], but never to an extent where they told me a syringe had been found in the room or there was blood on the keys of the hire car. That kind of information seems to come from police constables. You get someone who tells something to their wife, they tell their hairdresser, who tells a journalist.

“I think that there’s a lot of invention. A journalist might say to a detective, ‘Do you think Madeleine fell and died and Kate and Gerry got rid of the body?’ Off the record the detective might say ‘It’s possible’, and they write a story based on ‘sources close to the investigation.’ I’d be very surprised if there was any bribery, though a constable does earn only about €600 or €700 a month, so it could happen. The suggestion that the police were closing in on the McCanns . . . I’ve been disappointed by some of the reporting.”

Not that British reporting has been irreproachable. The slurs have been widely dissected, a suspect has been invented by one needy tabloid, and when I rang Paolo Marcilemo, the editor of the *Correio da Manhã*, which has a reputation for scurrilous reporting, he said that he was no longer giving interviews because the British press has misquoted him.

For the McCanns there is no respite, though they are slowly becoming accustomed to their grief. “They’re not gone, the feelings,” Gerry says. “When we enjoyed ourselves with the kids we had guilt – how could we enjoy ourselves when Madeleine was missing?”

But it's so important for the kids that it's unbridled love and attention for them. I'm definitely much better at doing that now, almost carefree for a lot of the time. Not 100 per cent."

They will return to their home in Rothley, in the East Midlands, they confirm, and the timing will depend on the police investigation, which is currently in a state of hiatus as the Polícia Judiciária waits for the results of British tests on samples taken from the apartment.

Gerry has been home twice, he says, and has been inside the house. "I was pretty anxious about it, but it's now a comfort. We'll go back when we've done as much as we possibly can for Madeleine. We're at a point where staying here is not necessarily adding anything to the campaign to find her."

He has also discussed returning to work with his line manager; he elected to take unpaid leave rather than compassionate leave shortly after Madeleine's disappearance. As a cardiologist who deals with very sick patients he doesn't want to return immediately to a full-time schedule of patient care, but plans to focus initially on MRI scans, administration and academic work. "When you're seeing 12 or 15 patients a day you have to be focused on them and can't be thinking about what you want to do for missing children in Europe. When I'm occupied and applied it helps, and work eventually will take some of that focus. The fund enables us to make decisions for us and for Madeleine, and not for financial necessity. It's not paying for any of our accommodation here, but it has covered a lot of expenses for us, and trips, and it helps to provide support for people to come out to help us, flights and things."

As a part-time GP, Kate's job is patient-centred, and she has yet to decide whether she will return to it. What they are certain of is that they will continue to campaign for systems to be established to help to recover missing children. Portugal, like Spain and many other European countries, does not have a sex offenders' register, and as for the UK, although a Child Rescue alert system was launched here last year, relying primarily on speedy contact with the media, it has yet to be tested. Neither does Britain have any reliable statistics on missing children, and this means that the scale of the problem is unknown.

Fortunately, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has a system that works, and can be copied. It is based in Virginia, employs 300 people and its success relies on instant media alerts and distribution of fliers, and a high level of training for the professionals involved. Its agenda has always been to make its methods operate globally, and now it has Gerry and Kate McCann on its side. Their determination to be involved in this task is the first sign that something positive, tangible and enduring could come from what has so far been the bewildering and tragic story of Madeleine McCann.