

The Disappearance of Emma Phillipoff

In-depth Timeline

Fall 2011 to November 28, 2012

HelpFindEmma.ca

Moving from Perth, Ontario to Victoria, British Columbia

Emma always wanted to live out west and made the move to Victoria in the Fall of 2011. She was 25 at the time and had no home or job lined up. Her plan was to figure things out once she arrived. She told a friend she had a feeling something amazing was going to happen in Victoria.

Life in Victoria

Emma lived with a childhood friend and friend's partner for a few months after her arrival, eventually moving to another unit in the same building. In the winter of 2011, she found employment as a barista at a cafe, but the job did not last long. After two or three months in Victoria, Emma developed a more transient lifestyle: moving in with another friend for a few months; living at Hotel 760 where she also worked cleaning rooms; staying on two (possibly three) boats; sleeping in the woods, and sometimes sleeping in a tree. From February to November 2012, she also stayed in the attic of the Sandy Merriman woman's shelter on a rotating basis, usually for a month at a time.

She obtained a seasonal job at the inner harbour seafood eatery, Red Fish Blue Fish, where she was employed during the busy months in 2012 until October 31. She was expected to return to the job in February 2013.

During her time in Victoria, Emma communicated with family and friends back home through cryptic, poetic, upbeat emails and the occasional phone call on holidays. Her loved ones were unaware that she was living in a shelter.

Emma could often be found reading in the children's section of the library or quietly meditating in the sun. She enjoyed spending time with members of the homeless community, with boat owners and artists down at the inner harbour, and with street performers around town. The many friends and acquaintances she made in different circles describe her in such terms as: free-spirited, creative, adventurous, giving, soft-spoken, private, independent, trusting, flighty, highly sensitive to people, and very brave to sleep alone in the woods. She is very kind and likes caring for people, especially the elderly, children, and pets. She is a skilled chef, photographer, and artist. She loves to write and maintained several journals and a blog. She prefers nature to city life, favours walking barefoot, loves travel and adventure, adores her family and friends, and is known to have an aversion to convention, intrusive questions, social media, cell phones, spending money, and playing any role in the establishment.

While her beauty and friendly nature attracted the attention of many in Victoria, she only dated one person that year; the brief relationship ended after three months on a mutually positive note.

She was reported to have enjoyed drinking and socializing with friends. She always offered a listening ear to others and freely shared her laughter and joy for life, but was not prone to sharing any inner thoughts or struggles. She told people how much she loved her family, but rarely talked about them.

Friends said by summer of 2012, Emma was in search of a more pure lifestyle. She quit binge drinking in June and also cut out cigarettes, coffee, and sugar. Some say she had occasionally smoked marijuana; others report never seeing her take any kind of drug. She is vegan and was said to have been experimenting with different combinations of foods (grains of rice, popcorn, pieces of fish). By late summer she was eating less and less and drinking copious amounts of water daily. A friend who also worked on the waterfront said she grew very thin and described her as becoming "monk-like" in her social and eating habits. She appeared to have trouble adapting to the changing seasons and by the beginning of fall she seemed very unsure about where to go and what to do with herself in the upcoming winter months. Shortly before her disappearance, she began to distance herself from others; becoming fearful, withdrawn, and paranoid.

If you have seen emma, you can

EMAIL ANONYMOUSLY
FILLIPOFF@HOTMAIL.COM

CALL
POLICE

CALL
911

VISIT
FINDEMMA.CA

HelpFindEmma.ca

The Van

In June or July of 2012, Emma purchased a van with the intention of living in it and traveling around the island. Staff from a storage facility remember her beaming with joy the day she moved her personal effects from locker to the van. She was thrilled to be reunited with her belongings and looked forward to the independence the vehicle would provide her; however, in time the hopeful purchase proved to be a financial burden and hindrance to the freedom she sought.

The van had to be towed three times shortly before Emma vanished and she had been asking around for the name of an inexpensive mechanic.

Travel Plans

Emma talked to many people about her desire to travel and seemed to be preparing for some kind of move. In mid-November, she told a friend she was leaving Victoria and possibly heading to Salt Spring Island or Tofino, BC. Friends recall her other plans: sailing on a boat to Mexico; heading to San Juan with a man she barely knew; moving to California; moving to Costa Rica; traveling to Japan with her father; living off the grid somewhere in the woods; visiting an aunt in Lantzville, BC; and surprising her family by going back home to Perth, Ontario.

If you have seen emma, you can

EMAIL ANONYMOUSLY
FILLIPOFF@HOTMAIL.COM

CALL
POLICE

CALL
911

VISIT
FINDEMMA.CA

HelpFindEmma.ca

Early Warning Signs

Entries in Emma's journal suggest she had been privately suffering with mental health issues as early as the age of 11. For years, her secretive and quiet nature enabled her to hide her inner turmoil from family and friends.

In the winter of 2011, a childhood friend and roommate in Victoria, saw warning signs when she observed Emma often obsessively arranging patterns using objects such as feathers, shells, rocks and food. Sometimes she insisted others participate in these compulsive rituals. Her friend contacted Emma's father, James, out of concern after she woke one night to find Emma outside in a euphoric state, high on the grass and stars. Emma was very upset to learn James had been contacted and declined his offer to fly her home. She insisted she would be fine on her own. Her parents were divorced and her father failed to inform Emma's mother, Shelley, about the incident. Shelley has stated she would have flown out immediately had she been made aware of what was going on.

According to three friends in BC, Emma had been experiencing ongoing stress related to feeling harassed by someone she had a bad experience with years prior in Campbell River, BC, where she studied culinary arts in 2008/2009. She did not provide details nor did she reveal his identity to her friends and in her journal. A roommate recalls Emma expressing the need to avoid social situations where she had to interact with men; the main reason she chose not to stay in co-ed shelters.

Those who knew her in Victoria say Emma seemed friendly, articulate, playful, clever and sociable; however, by early November of 2012, she had grown distant and friends noticed a dramatic change in her behaviour and personality. She refused invitations to go on adventures, cancelled a trip to Mexico with a friend at the last minute, and generally seemed frightened to go anywhere that wasn't the pier or the shelter.

About two weeks before she vanished, one friend recalled driving by the shelter and saw Emma looking cold and wet, standing motionless staring blankly at a murder of crows nearby. Around this time, shelter staff and residents also started to notice signs of paranoia and depression. She kept her curtains drawn at all times and was discovered frantically moving furniture from the shelter out to the curb and across the street because she claimed they were making too much noise and saying things to her. Just as she had done in Ontario before moving to Victoria, Emma began selling, donating, even throwing away her personal belongings.

This behaviour led shelter staff to suspect she might be suicidal and/or suffering from mental illness. Unable to contact her parents due to privacy laws, they called police to request a mental health check. Staff explained the situation over the phone and police, rather than visit the shelter to assess Emma, told staff to call back if they noticed any more odd behaviour. Staff did not call back. During this time, a concerned roommate encouraged Emma to spend less time at the shelter by taking out a membership at the YMCA and visiting the library as often as she could. She also strongly advised Emma to call her mother.

Emma made a series of tearful phone calls to her mother, starting on the night of Nov. 23. Shelley assured her each time they spoke that she would make the necessary arrangements for her to come home. Emma consistently called back the next day, insisting she would stay in Victoria to work things out on her own. This cycle of changing her mind occurred four times over the next four days. During one of these phone calls, Emma told Shelley she did not know how she could face her.

A close acquaintance reported seeing a very anxious Emma by the harbour a day or two before she vanished. When he asked their circle of friends what was wrong, they explained she was concerned about her mother arriving in Victoria.

Emma's final call to her mother was made on the morning of Nov. 28. She said, "Don't come Mom, not today." Shelley said there was a noticeable change in Emma's voice which greatly concerned her. Against the advice of family members who wanted to respect Emma's need for independence, Shelley put everything on hold and took a flight out later that same afternoon. With a history of mental illness in the family, her mother was very worried and felt Emma needed her.

According to witnesses, Emma returned to the shelter at around 6 p.m. that evening and was informed by staff at Sandy Merriman that her mother was on her way. She became visibly upset and anxious and quickly stormed out of the shelter. Another resident tried to pursue her outside but was unable to catch up with her.

It is unclear how staff knew Shelley was on her way as she did not tell them she was coming. Shelley arrived at the shelter at around 11 p.m. and learned that Emma did not claim her bed that night. Shortly after midnight, shelter staff called police to report Emma as a missing person.

If you have seen emma, you can

EMAIL ANONYMOUSLY
FILLIPOFF@HOTMAIL.COM

CALL
POLICE

CALL
911

VISIT
FINDEMMA.CA

HelpFindEmma.ca

Timeline & Sightings

If you have seen emma, you can

EMAIL ANONYMOUSLY
FILLIPOFF@HOTMAIL.COM

CALL
POLICE

CALL
911

VISIT
FINDEMMA.CA

[HelpFindEmma.ca](https://www.HelpFindEmma.ca)

Tuesday, Nov. 20 - YMCA

Emma visits the YMCA, located down the street from the shelter, to take out a membership. Surveillance video shows her entering and exiting the building four times within a 14-minute period. She seems to be nervously peering out the glass doors as though waiting for, or hiding from, someone or something outside. She pauses for approximately one minute each time as she exits and enters the building, finally exiting for the last time and turning right. Some believe she is holding something in her hands such as a cell phone or iPod. Others suspect she is simply fidgeting.

Wednesday, Nov. 21 - Van is Towed

Emma arranges to have a tow truck driver pick her up from Sandy Merriman shelter and drive to Sooke, BC to tow her red Mazda MPV back to the 700 block of Burdett Ave in Victoria. She is upbeat during the ride and talks about her plan to surprise her family by moving back home to Perth, Ontario. The driver recalls her looking up at the snow on the mountains, telling him she couldn't wait to get home where she could see the sun and snow.

Friday, Nov. 23 - First Call to Her Mom

Emma calls Shelley in tears around midnight and says she wants to come home. For Emma to reach out for help is unusual so Shelley assures her all arrangements will be made for her to fly home immediately. "Are you booking the flight?" Emma asks anxiously. She won't say what is bothering her but tells her mother she is safe.

Saturday, Nov. 24 - Emma Changes Her Mind

Emma calls back hours later, advising Shelley not to come, that she will stay and figure things out for herself. Shelley is worried and can sense something is terribly wrong, but reluctantly respects Emma's wishes and cancels the flight.

Change of Plan - Later that same night, Emma calls again to say she wants to come home, but is overwhelmed and needs Shelley to travel to Victoria to help her pack all of her belongings. Shelley immediately books a flight.

Sunday, Nov. 25 - Another Change of Plan

Emma phones her mother in the morning to tell her she has changed her mind again. She sounds calm and more confident during this call but there is still a sadness in her voice. Shelley agrees not to come but doesn't unpack.

Van is Towed Again - Because of parking enforcement, Emma has no choice but to arrange for her van to be towed again from Burdett Ave to a parking lot at the Chateau Victoria hotel.

Tuesday, Nov. 27 - Growing Concerns

Shelley grows increasingly concerned and she decides to dial the number on her call-display, thinking Sandy Merriman might be the name of a friend Emma is staying with. She speaks to a staff member and is shocked to learn Emma has been living in the woman's shelter on and off since the winter of 2011.

Notice on Van - Staff from the Chateau Victoria put a notice on Emma's van to have it towed.

Emma Calls Her Mom - Later that night, Emma calls her mother, again, in tears, asking for help to come home. Shelley immediately makes arrangements to fly out the next day.

Wednesday, Nov. 28

The Day of Emma's Disappearance

4:30 a.m. - Emma phones Shelley and changes her mind one last time. "Don't come, Mom, not today." Shelley tells Emma she won't fly out to Victoria, but against the advice of family, takes the first flight out that afternoon.

7 a.m. - Emma goes to the Chateau Victoria. She is very upset about the notice on her vehicle and asks staff for another day to move the van, which they grant.

8:23 a.m. - Emma is captured on video surveillance at the 7-Eleven store at the corner of Douglas and Humboldt Streets where she uses her debit card to purchase a \$200 prepaid credit card. She is wearing a beige winter jacket, camouflage pants and her hair is tied up in a bun. She is carrying several bags over her shoulder, including her orange purse. She lingers in the store by the doors nervously peering out the window.

10 a.m. - While riding the bus, Julien Huard sees Emma on Pandora Street, across from Alix Goolden Hall. He disembarks a few stops early to talk to Emma who is standing on the edge of the sidewalk, one step away from the road. She is wearing a puffy light coloured coat, her hoodie pulled up over her head and hair flowing out in disarray. She is carrying plastic bags in each hand with more bags over her shoulder and across her chest. He observes her from the back and profile but cannot see her face so he decides to go register for his health card as planned and returns to find Emma still there, standing motionless on the corner. He steps onto the street in front of her and peers into her hoodie to ask if she needs help and Emma slowly shakes her head as if to say no. He observes her for a short while until he decides, then and there, he is done with Emma. She won't accept help when offered. After Emma was declared missing, Julien told everyone involved in the search that he saw her Nov. 27. He later realized he had made an error in dates when Websleuths, an online community, scrutinized a post on his Facebook page and discovered the discrepancy. He claims he eventually informed everyone that he actually saw Emma the morning of Nov. 28, the day she went missing.

Noon - Some people think Emma visited the library sometime around noon.

Early Afternoon - A friend/colleague sees Emma sometime in the early afternoon near Our Place soup kitchen on Pandora Street. Her hair is tucked into her jacket. She says she isn't feeling well at all and can't talk. He asks if she needs a hug, but she retreats with an uncharacteristic horrified look on her face.

1 p.m. - A witness sees Emma looking vacant eyed, slowly shuffling along on Pandora street. She isn't wearing a hat and her hair looks as though it has been freshly washed. She is carrying several white plastic bags, an orange satchel, and is wearing camouflage pants and a white fleece jacket. The witness later reports the sighting to police and eventually hears back from the Victoria Police Department (VicPD) who take the full report.

Afternoon - Two people report seeing Emma on Douglas Street some time in the afternoon. They were so concerned by Emma's strange behaviour of walking back and forth in the street looking confused and lost, they immediately called police who took the report, however, it is unclear if they followed up. This was the first 911 call made that day. The witnesses recall her wearing shoes, though they later heard from others who saw Emma that day wandering barefoot in the street.

Afternoon - Another witness reports seeing Emma walking downtown that afternoon with an older man. No description of the man was provided.

Afternoon - A man who visited the Rock Bay shelter claims he saw Emma there at some point that afternoon. No details are provided. This is a shelter Emma refused to stay in as it was co-ed.

4 - 6 p.m. - Emma is sighted by the same person at two different locations. She first crosses their path as they exit the main Douglas Street doors of the Bay Centre. She is shuffling, moving slowly northward on the west side of Douglas Street, her long mane of hair flowing out the side of her hood. About 45 minutes later, they are in a car, stopped at the corner of Douglas and Finlayson Streets when, to their surprise, they see Emma crossing the street in front of them. She glances their way and gives a sad smile. They really want to help, but fear she might question their intentions. They go to VicPD headquarters to report the sightings on November 30. Police take their contact information but never call back to get the full report.

5:54 p.m. - Emma uses her debit card to purchase a prepaid cell phone at the same 7-Eleven where she purchased the prepaid credit card. Video surveillance shows her paying for the phone, then she lingers in the store by the doors, nervously peering outside as if she is afraid to leave or is avoiding someone. The cell phone she purchased has never been activated.

6:00 p.m. - Emma goes to the Sandy Merriman shelter. Witnesses at the shelter report Emma becoming very anxious and upset when told by a staff member that her mother is on the way. She storms out the front door. One resident tries to run after her but quickly loses sight. She reports Emma having mixed feelings of relief and fear about her mother's arrival. Though Shelley spoke with staff on the phone the day before, she did not tell them she was heading to Victoria.

6:10 p.m. - A driver with ABC Taxi picks Emma up near the shelter. She asks him to take her to the airport, but suddenly changes her mind. Even though she had \$2,000 to \$3,000 in her account, she tells him she can't afford the \$60 fare and asks to be dropped off exactly where she was picked up. When they arrive, she asks if she can sit in his cab for a while. The driver observes her behaving strangely. She becomes anxious and paranoid when she hears the dispatch radio. She stares at it and asks, "Why is there noise coming out of that?" She pays the fare with her debit card and quickly exits the cab.

6:15 p.m. - Denis Quay, an acquaintance of Emma, sees her standing barefoot on a corner looking disoriented, paranoid and seemingly unable to cross the street. He asks if she is looking for someone or if someone is following her. She doesn't say much and keeps looking all around her. She asks him to walk with her for a bit, but becomes increasingly uncomfortable with his questions and concern and decides to walk on her own. At approximately 7 p.m., he enters a nearby restaurant to call police and waits until they arrive. He observes them talking with Emma for a while then leaves, assuming she is safely in their care.

7:17 p.m. - Police locate Emma, barefoot and clutching her shoes, by the Empress hotel on Government Street and two officers assess her for 45 minutes. According to police notes, at no time did Emma engage in a dialogue but rather answered with one word or nodded her head. It was almost 30 minutes before she even spoke and then only gave her name at their insistence. She refused to put her shoes back on and said she was just taking a walk and planned to meet with a friend. By 8 p.m. police decide she is not a threat to herself or anyone else and watch her walk away. This is the last confirmed sighting of Emma. Shelley sent in a Freedom of Information (FOI) request on May 19, 2015, which was denied by the VicPD without reason.)

11 p.m. - Shelley arrives at the shelter and learns Emma did not claim her bed that night. The shelter calls police immediately to report Emma missing.

12 a.m. - Police arrive at the shelter shortly after midnight to take the report. Emma is declared a missing person.

After Emma's Disappearance

Nov. 29, 2012 - Chateau Victoria arranges for Allways Towing to tow Emma's van to their lot. Police find it there hours later, containing almost all of her possessions including her passport, laptop, journals, camera and recently borrowed library books. They then have it towed to their lot.

Nov. 29, 2012 - Shelley visits the shelter during each shift change and is informed staff noticed Emma had become depressed, possibly suicidal, and had been growing more erratic, paranoid and fearful in the two weeks leading up to her disappearance. They describe the incident when Emma moved shelter furniture outside, insisting the objects were talking to her, as well as the fact she was throwing away or donating many of her personal belongings. She learns about the call made to police weeks prior, when they were told to call back if Emma's condition persisted or worsened. Staff inform Shelley they never made that second call to police.

Nov. 29, 2012 - A witness reports seeing Emma at Lifestyle Market on Douglas street in Victoria. The sighting is unconfirmed.

Dec. 2, 2012 - A witness reports an odd encounter/unconfirmed sighting by the inner harbour after dark. Emma tells them to remember the name Emma Fillipoff, and asks them to repeat the name three times.

Dec. 5, 2012 - At 11:17 a.m., the \$200 prepaid credit card Emma purchased Nov. 28 is flagged for use at a Petro Canada station on Sooke Rd. The man who uses the card is cleared after being questioned and polygraphed by police. In news reports, police say he found the card on the side of the road near the Juan de Fuca Recreation Centre and Galloping Goose Trail in Colwood; however, he later calls Shelley on three occasions to explain he was drinking on a daily basis at the time, and was too drunk that night to remember where he found it. He knows it was still sealed and is certain he waited about a week to use it to buy a carton of cigarettes. He still claims he can only guess, based on usual routes traveled during that time, where he may have found the card.

Dec. 5, 2012 - Julien Huard, who met Emma in Perth in 2011 and moved to Victoria in early fall of 2012, becomes a person of interest when Emma's parents both find odd messages from him sent to them months prior, hidden in Facebook's "Other" folder. Also found is a message sent he sent to Emma weeks after she vanished, offering to build her a cabin in the woods. Julien is questioned and polygraphed and is quickly cleared as a suspect. He was part of the initial search team until he became a person of interest. He appeared in the 2014 CBC documentary, Finding Emma, and was interviewed in 2016 for The Night Time Podcast series on Emma's disappearance.

May 2014 - Gastown, BC - An agitated man was captured on surveillance at a clothing store in downtown Vancouver, with a crumpled up missing person's poster of Emma. He claimed Emma was his girlfriend and just wanted to be left alone. Despite the evidence of the grainy footage - which shows a man in a green shirt with a noticeable limp and sporting flame tattoos on his arm - no one has come forward with information and police have yet to identify him.

Searching for Emma

Following Emma's disappearance, a search team, comprised of Emma's family, friends, and volunteers scoured Victoria and the communities of Vancouver Island. Trails, parks and smaller islands were included. Eventually the target area widened to include the BC mainland and locations across Canada and the U.S., wherever possible sightings were reported. Most sightings were determined to be women who resembled Emma.

The VicPD dive team searched for evidence in the Victoria inner harbour but nothing was recovered.

A private investigator worked on the case for a year but could not locate Emma. Several psychics and mediums provided input. Hundreds of people have circulated posters and shared links, clues, and ideas.

In 2014, CBC's, The Fifth Estate, launched a 'Finding Emma' media campaign on Twitter, Facebook, and national television. An active homicide police officer, a forensic psychologist, and a criminologist were members of the team of experts who reviewed the evidence.

Despite a \$25,000 reward, there have been no confirmed sightings.

Early reports included: unconfirmed sightings in Fernwood Square, Goldstream Park, and by the inner harbour. A rumour circulated among friends that she was hitchhiking up and down the island and was doing well. Two people claimed she was panhandling on Commercial Drive in Vancouver. Several witnesses reported her missing person posters had been torn down in the Downtown East Side (DTES). A source at one establishment in the area believes she saw Emma ripping her own poster off the wall. Staff at a hunting/fishing store reported a woman resembling Emma asked how to disappear, explaining she had a stalker who followed her from Ontario to Victoria, then Vancouver. One individual, who operates online under many pseudonyms, described Emma as a "junkie" living in the DTES. He boasted standing next to her as she tore down her own poster, but would not provide more details and expressed no interest in the reward. Two separate tips originated in Nelson, BC early in 2014: a hitchhiker matching Emma's description was seen on Highway 3 near the Phillipoff family farm; the second sighting was up Slokan Valley about 30 minutes away, where another Phillipoff family member resided. Nelson, BC, RCMP followed up. These sightings remain unconfirmed. In early 2016, a friend reported seeing Emma sleeping on the steps of the Francophone Centre in Kelowna, BC. A volunteer team worked diligently with local police to follow up on the sighting. It, too, remains unconfirmed.

Emma's story has been the subject of many online articles and blogs, and has been featured on the Canadian podcast series, The Nighttime Podcast: and American podcasts, True Crime Garage, and Darkness Radio.

A team of volunteers work diligently with Emma's mother to handle tips, follow up on sightings, conduct interviews, produce visuals, and communicate with the public and police. They also administer the Facebook discussion group, helpfindemma.ca, and The Help Find Emma Phillipoff Facebook page, which now has an estimated 10k followers.

Tips and rumours continue to be reported and are investigated by Shelley's volunteer search team and by police.