

## Will the Internet Find Maura Murray?

Ten years ago, a 21-year-old UMass student vanished without a trace. For an army of amateur sleuths across the Internet, that was just the beginning.

By Bill Jensen | Boston Magazine | February 2014



On the afternoon of February 9, 2004, a 21-year old nursing student at UMass Amherst named Maura Murray sent an email to her professors: There was a death in the family, she wrote, and she'd be gone for a few days. Then she gathered up her text books—she'd always been a good student, scoring 1420 on her SATs—and climbed into her Saturn sedan. A 5-foot-7 brunette, she was a native of Hanson, Massachusetts, and had spent three months as a cadet at West Point before transferring to UMass. She packed toiletries, a week's worth of clothes, exercise gear—she ran track and cross-country—a stuffed animal given to her by her dad, and a necklace from her boyfriend, whom she'd met at West Point and was now stationed in Oklahoma. Murray planned to spend the following summer with him, and she may already have known that he intended to propose.

There were other items in the car, many of which would be obsessed over for the next decade: some alcohol; a MapQuest printout of directions to Burlington, Vermont; and a book, titled *Not Without Peril: 150 Years of Misadventure on the Presidential Range of New Hampshire*, which tells the tales of more than a dozen hiker tragedies in the White Mountains. Maura's parents separated when she was six, and though she lived with her mother, her father would often take her hiking in those mountains. By all accounts, she loved going up there.

By 7 p.m, it was dark and Maura was zipping along on a black stretch of Route 112 in Haverhill, New Hampshire. She took a shaky turn and crashed into a snow bank. Not long after, a passing motorist pulled up to the disabled car and asked Maura if she needed help. She declined. Mere minutes later, a police officer arrived at the scene and found the car locked, its windshield cracked, the air bags deployed—and not a soul in sight. In just those moments, Maura Murray had disappeared into the New England night.

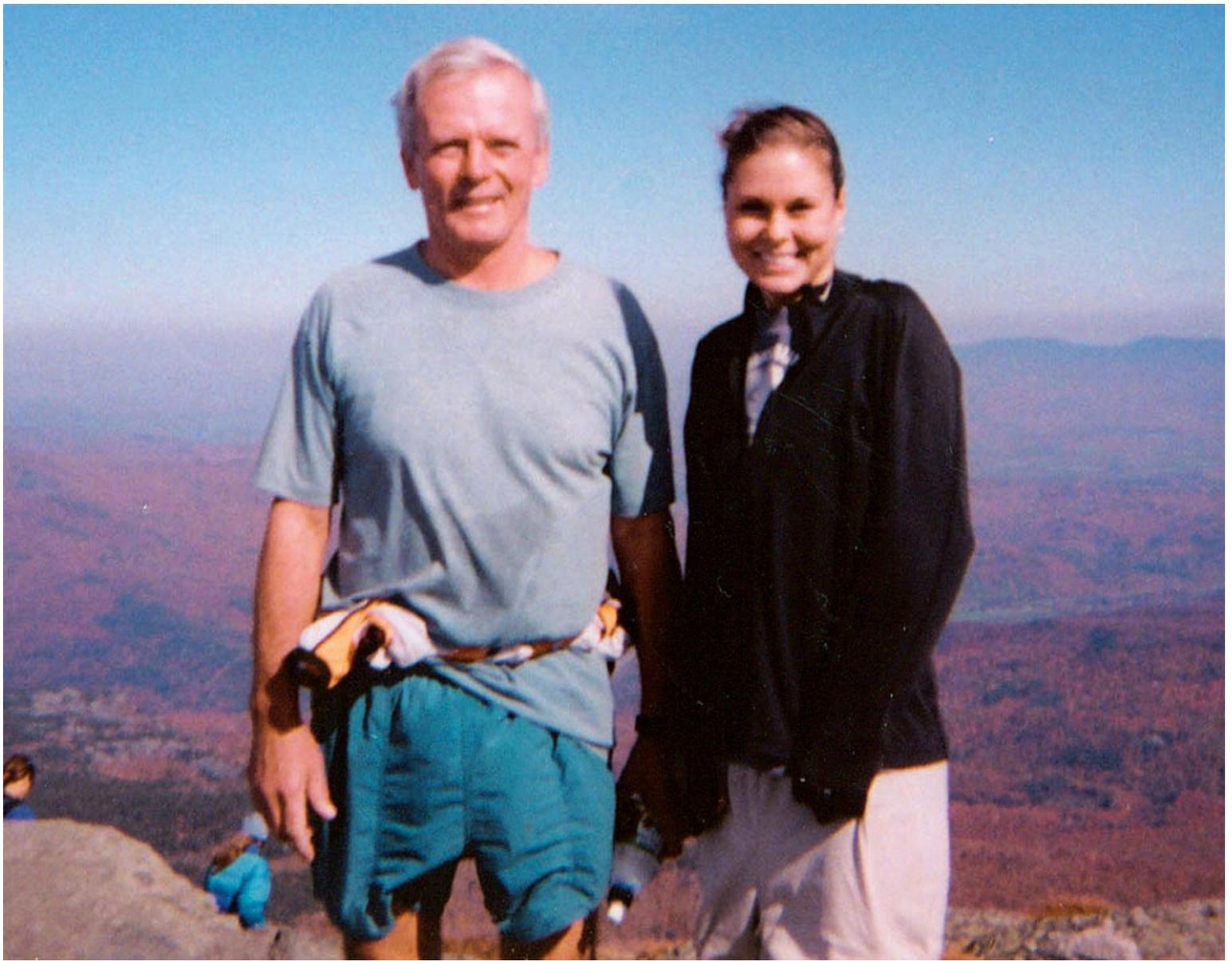
This month marks the 10th anniversary of Maura's disappearance. At the time, the case was a national sensation. Investigators began looking for her, with search dogs combing the area in a half-mile radius around the accident and helicopters deployed overhead. The media flocked to the scene: first the local television stations and the press up from Boston, and then the national media horde. Montel Williams and Greta Van Susteren covered the story, and on February 17, eight days after the disappearance, CNN's Soledad O'Brien interviewed Maura's father, Fred Murray, and her boyfriend, Bill Rausch, who flew in from Oklahoma. Rausch told O'Brien that, while traveling, he received a voice-mail message: "I could hear only breathing and then towards the end of the voice mail, I heard what was apparent [sic] to be crying and then a whimper, which I'm certain was Maura." The number was from a prepaid calling card. Two weeks later, as leads remained elusive, the *Globe* asked, "Where Could Maura Be?" Ominously, the paper noted, "The more details are revealed, the more baffling the case becomes, police acknowledge."

By the end of fall 2004, the TV crews and newspapers were gradually fading away. Still, Fred Murray would travel to the area every weekend, pressing authorities for more answers than they could provide. Maura's family and friends felt like they were out in the mountains alone. But they were about to get a lot more company than they ever bargained for. Maura had gone missing just as the social Web was being born, and there was a small chorus beginning to get louder in an unexpected place: Internet message boards.

For Maura Murray, the weekend prior to her disappearance had been a whirlwind. She was in the middle of her nursing program, as well as going on the clinical rotations that were part of her junior-year curriculum. She also worked as a security guard at an art gallery and in the dorms. At around 10:20 p.m. on the Thursday before she disappeared, she received a phone call, and later in her shift that night, she became so upset that her supervisor escorted her back to her dorm room.

That weekend, her father came up from his job in Connecticut to help Maura find a new car. Maura's 1996 Saturn "kind of blew a cylinder" and was "smoking something fierce," according to Fred Murray. "I said, 'You can't drive this car. The cops will pull you over in a heartbeat,'" he recalls. As a temporary fix, Fred says he suggested she put a rag inside the tailpipe to hide the smoke. He says he withdrew \$4,000 over the course of eight ATM transactions and that on that Saturday he took Maura to purchase a car in Northampton. They ended up a couple of thousand dollars short, though, so Fred figured he'd go home, round up some more money, and come back another time. Father and daughter drove back to campus and went to dinner at a brewpub in Amherst with one of Maura's friends. Later, Maura dropped off Fred at his hotel and drove his new Toyota Corolla to an on-campus party, where she drank with friends.

Maura left the party at 2:30 a.m. and headed back to Fred's hotel. At 3:30 a.m., while driving through Hadley, she crashed into a guardrail. The police showed up, but no charges were filed—and by all accounts Maura, though visibly shaken, was not given a Breathalyzer test. Close to \$10,000 worth of damage was done to the car.



FRED MURRAY AND HIS DAUGHTER, MAURA, BEFORE SHE DISAPPEARED.

Over the next couple of days, as she and her father tried to figure out the car's insurance situation, Maura started to make travel plans: Just before 1 p.m. on Monday, she called the owner of a condo rental in Bartlett, New Hampshire; she also dialed 1-800-GOSTOWE, but did not make a reservation at one of the hotels in the area. The same day, she sent an email to her boyfriend:

"I love you more stud. I got your messages, but honestly, i didn't feel like talking to much of anyone, i promise to call today though. love you, Maura"

Hours later she left him a voice mail, promising to talk. And she sent emails to her professors and supervisors, informing them—falsely—of a death in her family.

When she left her dorm room, did she hint at what lay ahead? Some reports claim she had packed her belongings and taken art off her walls—evidence, perhaps, that she was leaving for good. Her father says the floors had been cleaned over Christmas break, which explains why some of her things were still in boxes. But almost everyone agrees that Maura was planning to leave campus for at least a few nights. She withdrew \$280 from an ATM—almost all of the money in her account—and purchased, according to police, Baileys, Kahlúa, vodka, and box wine from a nearby liquor store. She checked her voice mail at 4:37 p.m., her last known call. She told no one where she was going.

On the Internet, Maura's disappearance is the perfect obsession, a puzzle of clues that offers a tantalizing illusion—if the right armchair detective connects the right dots, maybe the unsolvable can be solved. And so every day, the case attracts new recruits, analyzing and dissecting and reconstructing the details of her story with a Warren Commission–like fervor. The late-night car accident after the party. The father visiting with \$4,000 cash in his pocket. The crying episode.

The box of wine. The MapQuest printout. The rag in the tailpipe.

Online sleuthing stepped into the spotlight this past April, when the FBI asked for the public's help in identifying the Boston Marathon bombers. The agency, though, was drawing on a long tradition of crowdsourcing investigations—one that stretches from Wild West wanted posters to TV's *America's Most Wanted*. But it was also tapping into the more recent tradition of independent, online, open-sourced sleuthing: citizen detectives, often strangers living miles or continents apart, sharing information and working in unison. The practice can lead to stunning revelations, as when crime-blogger Alexandria Goddard uncovered details of a high school rape case in Steubenville, Ohio, by screen-grabbing the tweets of partygoers. And, famously, it can lead to false accusations: Some Reddit users helped identify the brand of hats worn by one of the marathon bombers, but others famously implicated numerous innocent standers-by.

Now, at least online, it often seems as there's no such thing as a cold case. But when Maura Murray disappeared, the social Web was in its infancy. There was no YouTube and no Twitter. On the day Maura went missing, Facebook was five days old. And so you can read the history of her case as a parable about the evolution of online sleuthing. In the months after Maura vanished, one of Rausch's friends launched a site in an attempt to publicize the case. Long-gone sites like alt.true-crime and crimenews2000.com began reposting newspaper articles, as well as the standard details. In November 2004, nine months after she vanished, a second cousin of Maura's started the website mauramurray.com. A Maura Murray string was even created on justiceforchandra.com, a site set up to discuss the case of Washington, DC, intern Chandra Levy, who had gone missing three years earlier.

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In February 2005, members of the DIY detective message board websleuths.com jumped into the fray. Anonymous posters with names like Grassyknoll2 and CyberLaw attempted to piece together a time line, wondering why Maura would have partied on Saturday night, or what made her so upset at work. In 2007, pages on Facebook and MySpace were created in hopes of gathering tips. And in the Franconia city forum on the small-town message board topix.com, more than 42,000 comments have been posted on a Murray thread in just the past four years.

Just as with anywhere else on the Internet, the discussion can run from constructive to abusive. Debates range from the backgrounds of the neighbors along Route 112 to whether Maura was trying to use the rag in the tailpipe to burn her car. The forums are awash with theories: Some believe she was taken by a serial killer monitoring the police scanner. Others think she faked the accident and bolted for Canada. The most obsessive even make pilgrimages to the curve on Route 112—snapping photos, taking measurements, attempting to reconstruct the accident.

Within the past year, a few users have broken off from the free-for-all of the message boards and launched stand-alone sites with a sole focus on finding Maura. One of them, called Not Without Peril, was created by Joseph Anderson, 30, an attorney from Whitman, Massachusetts, who came across Maura's case in early 2013 while researching another missing person. He became fascinated, and began commenting on sites under the pseudonym "Sam Ledyard." In the summer of 2013 he launched his own site with a few other regular commenters, naming it after the title of the book that was found in Maura's car. In just a few months, it has racked up more than 22,000 comments, Anderson says. The contributors to the site have come to know one another, and have taken on roles—for instance, one is known for his connections on other Maura Murray sites; another is a real estate agent, adept at pulling useful info from the MLS database. Anderson spends hours per day on Maura's case. When he gets home from work, he usually hops on the computer and starts digging. "It could go on from 7 till midnight," he says.



MAURA MURRAY'S BLACK SATURN AFTER THE CRASH. OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS, INTERNET OBSESSIVES HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO MAKE PILGRIMAGES TO THE SITE OF THE ACCIDENT. (PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANK KELLY, NEW HAMPSHIRE LEAGUE OF INVESTIGATORS)

Butch Atwood was driving his school bus back to his home just after 7 p.m. when he spotted a black Saturn stopped in the eastbound lane of Route 112, but facing west. He later told police that he pulled up beside the wreck and asked a woman fitting Maura's description if he should call for help. The woman told him no, and that she had already called AAA. That seemed strange to him, since cell-phone reception in the area was weak to nonexistent. When he reached his house—it was within view of the accident scene—he called the police anyway.

In a house steps away from the Saturn, resident Faith Westman had also called the police. She said she saw what looked like a man smoking a cigarette in the car; her husband later said it could have been a woman on a cell phone. Another neighbor said that from her kitchen window she saw the car stopped, with lights flashing, and someone walking around the vehicle.

The first police officer arrived at 7:46 p.m. He found a car, but no woman. Inside the Saturn, police later detected the smell of alcohol, and found stains on the driver's-side door and the ceiling that looked like red wine. Red liquid was found on the ground, as well as an empty soda bottle, which smelled of booze. "It was obvious that she had been drinking," says Jeff Strelzin, chief of the homicide unit at the New Hampshire Attorney General's Office and the lead prosecutor in the investigation. There was no sign of a struggle or foul play. Police found no footprints heading off the road into the woods.

As the days stretched on, Fred Murray came to feel that the police were botching the search. He was upset that the Haverhill, New Hampshire, police hadn't immediately alerted other departments along Route 112 of Maura's disappearance, that they hadn't interviewed all the residents within eyeshot of the scene, and that they waited so long to talk to the last people Maura was known to have spoken to, including the owner of the rental condo. He was even more upset when the Haverhill PD issued a press release, two days after Maura's disappearance, claiming she was "possibly suicidal." Fred, his ex-wife, Laurie, and Bill Rausch's mother, Sharon, all became increasingly, and very publicly, critical of the official investigation. (Laurie died of cancer in 2009.)

Fred claims that police gave their search dogs a new pair of gloves—found in the back seat of the car, but never worn—as a scent for Maura, instead of something that would have been more identifiable, like her running shoes. He also alleges that on the night of the accident, the police failed to search the direction Maura was headed. "I knew she was headed east," Fred says. "She was headed to Bartlett. She was up there as an infant. I remember changing her

diapers in a tent up there, for Chrissakes.

“It’s freezing cold out, there’s a crack in the windshield, there’s a potential head injury, there’s arguably evidence of drinking, which would promote hypothermia. A young person. In a state of shock. You have danger. And you don’t go down the street the way she was going?”

Even after a decade, Fred wants more answers about what the police were doing—or not doing—in the two days after Maura’s disappearance. This year, he’s renewing his call for the FBI to investigate the officers who conducted the original investigation.

“Fred has been a difficult person to deal with from the beginning,” Strelzin says. “I understand a lot of where he is coming from, but I feel his anger is misplaced.”

With no trust in local law enforcement, Fred welcomed volunteer citizens to join in the search. A year into the case, former New Hampshire state police lieutenant John Healy met a relative of Maura’s named Helena Murray at a conference on missing persons. Having a college-aged daughter himself, and knowing he had the tools to help, Healy organized a group of experienced private investigators and began to make trips to Route 112, even bringing cadaver dogs to the scene.

Fred Murray initially worked closely with Healy’s group. In 2005, though, he sued the state police in an attempt to make public all of the reports pertaining to the investigation. He was unsuccessful, and what’s more, Healy and his volunteers publicly disagreed with his effort. Fred says more conflicts arose, so he stopped working with them. “He shut the door on me and the whole group of volunteers ever since,” Healy says. Healy’s group is still trying to find Maura and, by his estimates, has spent thousands of hours following leads. “We’re doing this for their whole family,” Healy says.

Sometimes, even after all these years, someone thinks they’ve found a new clue.

On November 1, a man calling himself “Tom Davies” logged onto Anderson’s site and asked, “What color was Maura’s backpack?”

“Black,” was the reply. “Why do you ask?”

“I ask because about a year after Maura disappeared, I found a black backpack in the woods behind the bathrooms at the Pemigewasset Overlook.”

Davies went on to say that after he found the backpack, he informed a state trooper, but had heard nothing since. Could the backpack still be up there? “Being a father with several daughters,” Davies wrote, “I’ve been haunted by Maura’s disappearance.”

A week later, a commenter named NHRider asked, “Was the area not far from the road? I am going to take a ride up there today and look.”

An hour and a half later, NHRider posted again: “Holy Crap!! I almost crapped my pants! Tom is legit. I just got back from the Pemi overlook and I found the black backpack.”

NHRider said he contacted the authorities and gave them directions to find the backpack, which was around 30 miles from where Maura was last seen. He said he didn’t have a camera with him so he didn’t take any photos, but reported that the bag was empty and “frozen solid.” He claimed that when he went back to the scene the following day the backpack was gone, presumably taken by the cold-case unit. All Strelzin will say is that “we are aware of the backpack.” It’s impossible to know whether it was a real clue, a red herring, or part of some loony Internet game—no different from a bizarre YouTube video, featuring a bespectacled man cackling into the camera, that surfaced in 2012 on the eighth anniversary of Maura’s disappearance, but proved to be just a disturbing false lead.

Strelzin knows firsthand how citizen sleuths can solve a mystery. In 2003, he worked the case of a Concord, New Hampshire, man who kidnapped and killed his two children. Once apprehended, the man refused to divulge the location of the buried bodies, and hanged himself in his jail cell. After his death, private citizens formed search groups and traveled to the area authorities believed the children were buried. “I would communicate with some of those groups, share information, send pictures back and forth,” Strelzin says. Eventually, one of the searchers found the children’s bodies just off the highway in Hudson, Ohio.

In Maura Murray’s case, Strelzin will not say how often law enforcement monitors online forums, but concedes that the police are “aware of things that are said.” He adds that “nothing fruitful” has ever come from the DIY detectives.

“All we ask is that they do not interfere in the investigations,” Strelzin continues. “You would expect that if people had information they would contact the authorities.”

From the sprawling online world of the Maura Murray mystery—filled with anonymous commenters, trolls, and theorists—a freelance journalist, using his real name, had emerged, determined to crack the case. In the summer of 2010, James Renner, a former reporter for a weekly newspaper called the *Cleveland Scene*, saw an episode of *20/20* on Maura. “I just thought, Wow, I wonder if I could figure it out,” Renner says. He began posting on message boards, and launched his own blog, *My Search for Maura Murray*, in June 2011. Eventually, he had so much information up on the site—from minuscule facts to big theories—that he decided to begin working on a manuscript.

Renner has just completed a 300-page book about his search for Maura, and can rattle off minute details about the case as if they were baseball stats. During his investigation, Renner wrote on his site that he discovered that just three months before her disappearance, Maura was visited by police officers at her dorm on account of \$79.02 she had spent on pizza deliveries with a stolen credit card number. He also wrote that records indicated the charges would be dropped within three months under one condition: Maura would have to stay out of trouble until then. Could her late-night car accident, after drinking at a party, have brought those charges back into play? Renner believes that Maura ran away—and that she may still be alive. This past December, he traveled through Quebec following up on a lead he read on a message board in 2009 about Maura being in Sherbrooke—a town near the New Hampshire border. He posted flyers with Maura’s photo along the way, and while he says he got some tantalizing leads, none panned out. Sherbrooke joined places like Montreal; Toronto; Hillsboro, New Hampshire; and Barton, Vermont on the long list of spots where Maura had supposedly been spotted, but never found.

Renner also questions whether Fred may be standing in the way of finding his daughter. On his blog, Renner has speculated that the father knows more than he is letting on, and he theorizes that Fred may know why Maura went to New Hampshire, even if he may not know where she is now. “Whether he helped her or not, I don’t know,” Renner says.

After hearing about numerous accusatory posts on Renner’s blog, Fred refused to cooperate for the book. He believes his daughter was abducted by “a local dirtbag” and rejects the notion that she was running away. “She didn’t have any reason,” Fred says. “She had things going for her. She was going to be a nurse. She was getting a new car—a three-year-old car—the very next Saturday. She was getting married soon. She was getting great marks.”

The feud between Renner and Murray has become personal. “What I think he’s trying to do is create characters for a screenplay,” Fred says of Renner. “I have spent countless hours. Every possible trail. You wouldn’t believe the places I’ve been in.” For his part, Renner finds Murray’s behavior suspicious.

“In the history of missing women, what father has ever not wanted more publicity about their missing daughter?” Renner says.

Fred says he’s waiting to see the book before he responds to it. “From what I hear,” he says, “there’s a lot of false insinuations.”

Renner says he would welcome a lawsuit from Fred Murray. “There’s nothing that would please me more than to depose Fred in court under oath,” Renner says. “Everything in the book is factual and backed up with documentation.”

“He wants me to be a subplot, ’cause I didn’t talk to him,” Fred counters. “I can take temporary hits. That’s losing battles. But there’s a war.”

For Helena Murray, the downsides of citizen sleuthing have come to outweigh the benefits. “It’s terribly, terribly sad to see what they do to [Fred] online,” she says. Helena even took down the message board on her site, *mauramurraymissing.com*, when visitors’ attacks became too sharp.

“I don’t really give a shit about that crap,” Fred says. “That’s a sideshow. The deal is: Where is my daughter?”

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