

girl still missing

One cold winter night, Maura, 21, just picked up and left her college campus—and vanished without a trace.

Route 112 near Haverhill, New Hampshire, has lots of twists and turns, but none are quite as wicked as the 90-degree swerve across from the Weathered Barn, a dilapidated former antiques store. And at 7:30 p.m. on February 9, 2004, Maura Murray, 21, found out just how difficult it can be to navigate that turn—when she completely missed it.

Maura's '96 Saturn careened off the road into the woods, barely missing a tree. She was fine. The car wasn't. The radiator was damaged, and the wheels sank into a few feet of packed snow. About five minutes later, a school bus drove by. Butch Atwood, the driver, was off-duty and headed to his cabin just up the road. "Are you okay?" he shouted to Maura in her car. "Should I call AAA?"

Maura rolled down her window and shivered from the 12-degree chill. She mumbled that she'd already called AAA for a tow. Atwood thought she seemed like she'd been drinking. "Okay," he said, "I'll call the police and fire department. Why don't you come to my house? You can get warm and wait there."

"No," Maura replied firmly, "I'll wait here."

Atwood thought it was possible that Maura might

have been scared of him—he weighs 350 pounds and has a grizzled beard—so he didn't press the point. Instead, he drove the 100 yards to his cabin and called the police himself. About 15 minutes later, Atwood saw the police pull up to Maura's car.

When they looked inside, they found an open can of Skyy Blue malt liquor in the front seat. In the back was a suitcase filled with clothes; a stuffed monkey and a diamond necklace that her boyfriend, Bill Rausch, had given to her; two textbooks; and another book—*Not Without Peril*, an account of people who died climbing New Hampshire's Mount Washington, bookmarked at a chapter titled "A Question of Life or Death."

But Maura was nowhere in sight.

TAKING OFF

No one knows where Maura was going three hours earlier when she got into her car at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she was a junior studying nursing. She didn't tell her friends, her family, or her boyfriend that she was leaving campus at all. The only thing she said to Bill, in an e-mail she'd sent at 1 P.M. that day (after she'd failed to return his two phone calls and an e-mail he sent the previous day) was, "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." Four hours after she e-mailed Bill, Maura did write a note to her boss at the campus art gallery before she took off.

In it, she said that she had a family emergency and had to go out of town for a week. According to the police report, she had also checked out information about Stowe Mountain and printed out directions to

Burlington, Vermont (which is in the opposite direction from where she'd crashed). Then she packed her stuff, left her dorm, took \$280 out of an ATM, bought a can of Skyy Blue and a bottle of red wine at a liquor store, got in her car—and started driving.

EARLY WARNING

Maura had always seemed like she had it all together. She was ranked fourth in her high school class (she scored a 1420 on her SAT), and enrolled at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Then, in fall 2003, Maura transferred to UMass Amherst because she decided she'd rather heal people than kill them, says her father, Fred Murray.

Maura had always shown athletic prowess too, and in high school her reputation as a star runner (she ran a five-minute mile) was known throughout Massachusetts. But when Maura didn't win a race, which was rare, she'd get really quiet. Even though you could tell she was beating herself up inside for not winning, if you asked her whether she was upset, she'd shake her head no. Maura was like that: She kept things to herself and few people ever saw her cry.

That is, until a few days before she disappeared. Four days earlier, on Thursday, February 5, Maura had called her older sister Kathleen, 26, at around 10:20 p.m., during a quiet patch at Maura's second job manning a dorm security desk. "I was telling her all about this fight I'd had with my fiancé," says Kathleen. "Maura kept saying, 'Don't worry, he's a good guy. It'll work out.'" After they got off the phone, Maura was sitting at her desk doing her job. Then, according to police reports, she inexplicably burst into tears in front of a coworker—and wouldn't say why.

ANOTHER OUTBURST

Two days later, on Saturday, February 7, Maura's dad drove up to Amherst to help Maura buy a new car. Maura and her father spent the day at car dealerships and then hit the Amherst Brewing Company for grilled chicken salads. At 10 P.M. her dad wanted to call it a night, so he had Maura drop him off at his motel, then drive herself to the dorm in his car.

About an hour later, Maura arrived at her friend Sara Alfieri's dorm room to hang out. For the next three hours, Maura, Sara, and a couple of friends sat around talking and listening to music while drinking Skyy Blue malt mixed with a little bit of wine. A couple of times, when there were pauses in the conversation, Maura mentioned that she wanted to return the car to her dad that night. "It didn't make any sense," says Kate Markopolous, who was there. Why would Maura, who'd had a few drinks and seemed tired, go to the trouble of driving all the way to her dad's motel in the middle of the night, when she didn't need to?

At 2:30 A.M., Maura left Sara's room, telling everyone she was going to go upstairs to her room. But instead, she got in her dad's car and started driving back to his motel. On the highway, the car jumped a sandy embankment and hit a guardrail. The front of the car's radiator crumpled, so Maura called AAA to tow the car. The police arrived and wrote up a report—but didn't give Maura a ticket.

When Maura told her father about the accident the next morning, he was upset. "The first thing I asked was, 'Are you all right?'" he says. As Fred Murray called garages, Maura sat there crying. "She kept repeating 'I'm sorry' over and over," he says. "I think she felt like she had really let me down." At 2 P.M., Murray dropped

a still-teary Maura off at her dorm in a rental car. "I said, 'Maura, it will get fixed. Don't worry,'" he says. Then Maura got out, and her dad drove away.

DESPERATE SEARCH

The next day, on February 9, the New Hampshire police arrived at the scene of Maura's second accident—the one on Route 112. The police, fire department, and local residents searched area roads for her. They also left a message for the Murray family to let them know that there had been an accident. When Maura didn't turn up the next day, the police called again and told them she was missing.

Fred Murray drove up to New Hampshire and got a room at the Wells River Motel, near the accident site. As the police continued their search, Murray, along with the rest of his family and Maura's boyfriend, combed the area too. "I can't explain how it feels to be walking up an embankment, thigh-deep in snow, and then there's a big hill in front of you, and you have to walk up it because you see footprints in the snow and you might find your sister's body at the end," says Kathleen.

Two days after Maura's disappearance, dogs had tracked her scent to the road, about 100 yards away from the site. Her family thought that maybe someone had picked Maura up, so they printed up 15,000 flyers with her picture, and a crew of volunteers began tacking them to every signpost and gas station within 50 miles. But weeks went by, and no one came forward. So the Murrays are still searching for Maura.

QUESTIONS REMAIN

There is still no sign of Maura. "The only thing that makes sense is that a bad guy got her," says her dad.

But police disagree. "There is no evidence that she was abducted," says New Hampshire State Police Sergeant Thomas Yorke. Police have told newspapers that they suspect Maura intended to kill herself, but they've reached no conclusions. "As far as we're concerned, she's a missing person," says Yorke.

Maura's crying, along with her atypical drinking (her family and friends say she wasn't a drinker) and the two car accidents just before she disappeared, raises the question of whether she was buckling under some emotional pain. "I don't know what could have been going on that she didn't tell me about," says Bill. "As far as I knew, everything was fine."

"I may go to my grave never knowing where she's gone or even why she left school," says her father. "And as far as I can tell, no one else knows either."