Rosa remembers the morning clearly. “He was dressed in his nursing uniform and had nothing with him other than a small Kathmandu backpack that he took with him every day.”

Rosa would later hear from police what her son actually did that morning. “He switched off his phone as he left the house, drove to the local bank, withdrew money and headed out of town.”

It wasn’t until a few hours after Brett had left the house that his parents had cause to worry. “Alarm bells started to ring for Colin and I when I checked the answering phone midafternoon when I got home from my part-time job,” Rosa says.

“I found a message from Edith Cowan University for Brett, reminding him if he was unable to attend his placement he must let his nursing supervisor know the reason for non-attendance.”

Not only that, but Brett had left his medication on the fridge. Despite her jangling nerves, Rosa tried to reason that eventually her son would turn up at a mate’s place. “However, after several phone calls and a sleepless night, we started to come to grips with the fact that this may not be the case,” she says.

Brett’s family and friends incessantly called his mobile phone but he never answered, so the McGillivrays reported him missing. In an attempt to find him, police checked Brett’s bank records and found footage of him on a security camera in Ceduna on the South Australian west coast, nearly 2000km east of Perth. The footage showed Brett withdrawing money from an ATM. “This was the Wednesday before Easter and our lives were in turmoil,” Rosa says.

All she and Colin could do was cling to the hope that Brett had gone to Ceduna to work on a fishing boat, even though he’d never taken off like that before.

The following week came news. Police told the McGillivrays that a park ranger on the Luritja Rd heading towards Kings Canyon in the Northern Territory had spoken to Brett on Good Friday. Apparently, Brett had become disoriented after sleeping “off-road” and was having trouble finding his car. “Brett told the ranger who he was and said, ‘Perhaps I should think of heading home anyway’,” Rosa says. Although he looked well, the ranger was concerned enough to report the meeting to the Hermannsburg cops. But it wasn’t until after the Easter break that the Hermannsburg police realised that Brett was registered as a missing person. It was too late.

“Road blocks were put in place but by this time he had already driven through Alice Springs,” Rosa explains. “We know this, as there was a bank slip found in his car with proof of purchase of fuel at a service station in Alice on Saturday morning, April 15.”

By that time, Brett had withdrawn all but a few dollars from his everyday account. His parents topped up the account but Brett didn’t try to withdraw money again. “What happened between that Saturday and until Brett’s vehicle was found is a mystery,” Rosa says. “His car may have been there for over a week.”

It’s certainly possible, because a truck driver saw Brett’s unoccupied white Toyota Camry in a truck bay on the Stuart Hwy at Attack Creek on Saturday, April 22, and noticed it was still there when he drove past again, on Wednesday, April 26. Concerned about the welfare of the driver, the truckie took a closer look and found the keys still in the ignition, along with Brett McGillivray’s wallet and mobile phone. The truck driver immediately reported the abandoned car to Elliot police. Police quickly arranged an air and ground search, and appealed for information through the media in both the Northern Territory and WA.

Consequently, the McGillivrays allowed the police to handle media inquiries and they stayed away from the search site on Sunday, April 30, with no sign of Brett in the bush or beside the highway, the search was called off.

As days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, the McGillivrays began hearing disturbing reports of other men who’d gone missing from the Northern Territory outback, and with the mysterious disappearance of Peter Falconio still fresh in people’s minds, rumours sprang up that a serial killer was on the loose. Among the growing list of missing men were 42-year-old Czech tourist Lubos Gencur, who vanished from Curtin Springs in December 2004; 60-year-old Stanislav Dobias, who disappeared from Attack Creek in September 2005; 41-year-old Aboriginal man Aloysious Hayes, who went missing in January 2006 after visiting an outstation near Alice Springs; and 26-year-old New Zealander Jamie Herdman, who was reportedly seen trying to thumb a ride outside the Daly Waters Inn in November 2006.

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