

"*Dopesick* is a deep—and deeply needed—look into the troubled soul of America."

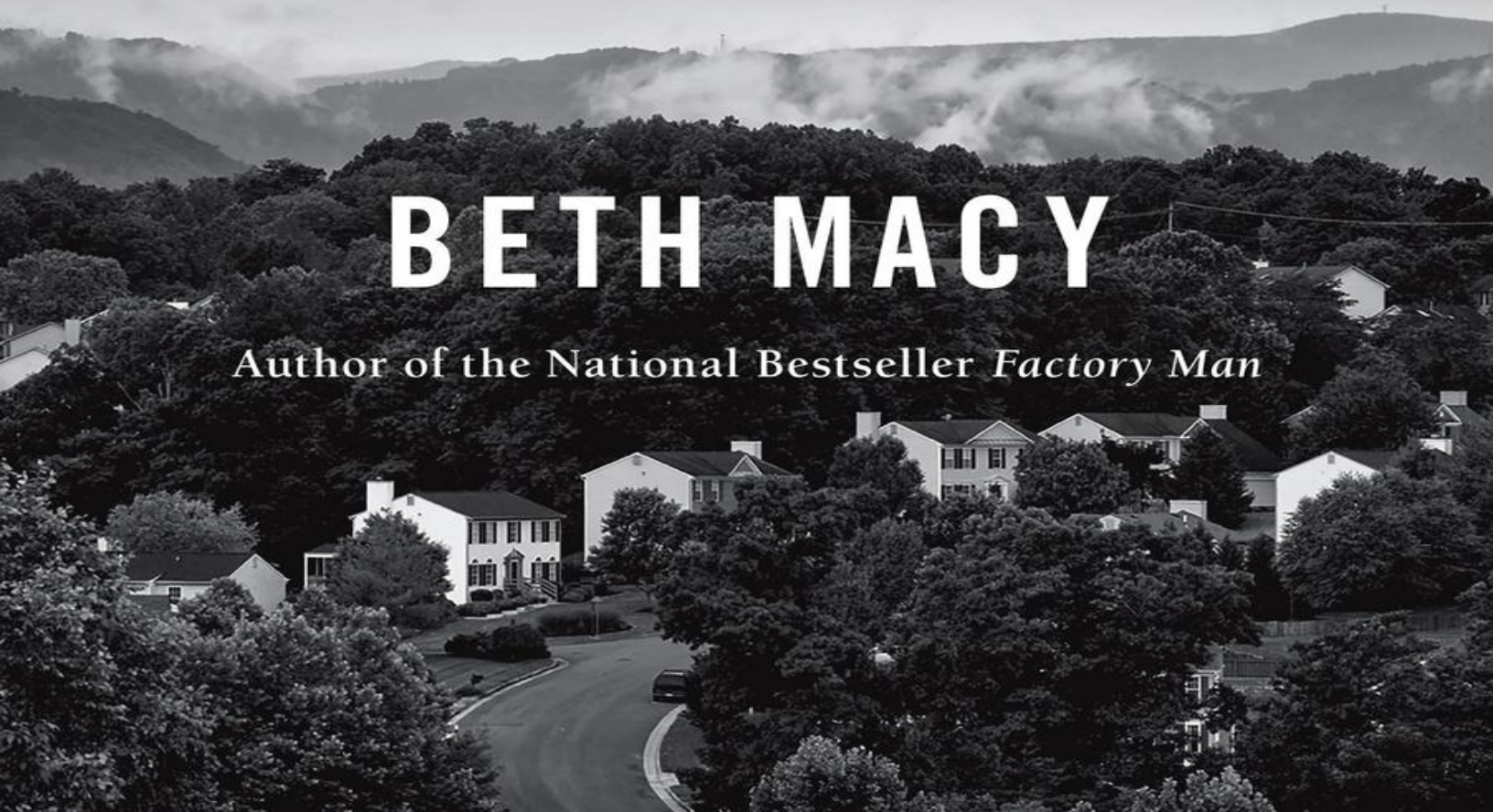
—TOM HANKS

DOPE SICK

DEALERS, DOCTORS, *and*
THE DRUG COMPANY THAT ADDICTED AMERICA

BETH MACY

Author of the National Bestseller *Factory Man*



DOPE SICK

DEALERS, DOCTORS, AND THE DRUG
COMPANY THAT ADDICTED AMERICA

Beth Macy



Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston London

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2018 by Beth Macy

All photographs are by Josh Meltzer, with the exception of the epilogue snapshot of Tess Henry, which is courtesy of Patricia Mehrmann.

Cover design by Lauren Harms

Cover photograph by Josh Meltzer

Author photograph by Tom Landon

Cover © 2018 Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

littlebrown.com

facebook.com/littlebrownandcompany

twitter.com/littlebrown

First ebook edition: August 2018

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or call (866) 376-6591.

ISBN 978-0-316-55128-1

LCCN: 2017961068

E3-20180711-NF-DA

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Part One: The People v. Purdue](#)

[Chapter One: The United States of Amnesia](#)

[Chapter Two: Swag 'n' Dash](#)

[Chapter Three: Message Board Memorial](#)

[Chapter Four: "The Corporation Feels No Pain"](#)

[Part Two: Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear](#)

[Chapter Five: Suburban Sprawl](#)

[Chapter Six: "Like Shooting Jesus"](#)

[Chapter Seven: FUBI](#)

[Chapter Eight: "Shit Don't Stop"](#)

[Part Three: "A Broken System"](#)

[Chapter Nine: Whac-A-Mole](#)

[Chapter Ten: Liminality](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Hope on a Spreadsheet](#)

[Chapter Twelve: "Brother, Wrong or Right"](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Outcasts and Inroads](#)

[Epilogue: Soldier's Disease](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More Beth Macy](#)

[Notes](#)

[Photos](#)

[Also by Beth Macy](#)

[About the Author](#)

This evil is confined to no class or occupation. It numbers among its victims some of the best women and men of all classes. Prompt action is then demanded, lest our land should become...stupefied by the direful effects of narcotics and thus diseased physically, mentally, and morally, the love of liberty swallowed up by the love of opium, whilst the masses of our people would become fit subjects for a despot.

—Dr. W. G. Rogers, writing in *The Daily Dispatch*
(Richmond, VA), January 25, 1884

A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity, it dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path.

—Agatha Christie, “The Last Séance” (from *The Hound of Death and Other Stories*)

OceanofPDF.com

In memory of Scott Roth (1988–2010), Jesse Bolstridge (1994–2013), Colton Scott Banks (1993–2012), Brandon Robert Perullo (1983–2014), John Robert “Bobby” Baylis (1986–2015), Jordan “Joey” Gilbert (1989–2017), Randy Nuss (1984–2003), Arnold Fayne McCauley (1934–2009), Patrick Michael Stewart (1980–2004), Eddie Bisch (1982–2001), Jessee Creed Baker (1982–2017), and Theresa Helen Henry (1989–2017)

OceanofPDF.com

Author's Note

In 2012, I began reporting on the heroin epidemic as it landed in the suburbs of Roanoke, Virginia, where I had covered marginalized families for the *Roanoke Times* for two decades, predominantly those based in the inner city. When I first wrote about heroin in the suburbs, most families I interviewed were too ashamed to go on the record.

Five years later as I finished writing this book, nearly everyone agreed for their names to be used, with the exception of a few, as noted in the text, who feared going public would jeopardize their jobs or their safety.

I'm indebted to the families I first met in 2012 who allowed me to continue following their stories as their loved ones grappled with rehab and prison, with recovery and relapse. I'm also grateful for insights gleaned from several rural Virginia families, advocates, and first responders, many of whom were quietly battling the scourge almost two decades before I appeared on the scene. Several law enforcement officials spoke with me on background and on the record, including a few who had arrested their own relatives for peddling dope. So did scores of doctors and other caregivers who, after working fourteen-plus-hour days, did not feel their work was complete without getting the story of this epidemic out there.

A few interviewees died before I had time to transcribe my notes, including one by his own hand after relapsing and fearing that his wife—whom he loved more than anything in the world—would divorce him. “If she ever figures out she don't need me,” he confided, “I'm screwed.”

Their survivors continued talking to me during their most fragile moments, generously texting and calling and emailing photographs long after their loved ones' battles were over. One requested my MP3 recording of her departed loved one's interview, so desperate was she to hear his voice

again. Another shared her deceased daughter's journals.

I'm particularly indebted to four Virginia moms: Kristi Fernandez, Ginger Mumpower, Jamie Waldrop, and Patricia Mehrmann. More than anyone, they helped me understand the crushing and sometimes contradictory facets of an inadequate criminal justice system often working at cross-purposes against medical science, and a health care bureaucracy that continues pumping out hard-core pain pills in large doses while seeking to quell cravings and turn around lives with yet more medication.

In sharing their experiences, these mothers hoped readers would be moved to advocate for life-saving addiction treatment and research, health care and criminal justice reform, and for political leadership capable of steering America out of the worst drug epidemic in modern history. Until then, they hoped their children's stories would illuminate the need for patients not only to become more discerning consumers of health care but also to employ a healthy skepticism the next time a pharmaceutical company announces its latest wonder drug.

OceanofPDF.com



Riverview Cemetery, Strasburg, Virginia

Prologue

Two years into a twenty-three-year prison sentence, on a day pushing 100 degrees, Ronnie Jones had his first visitor. I'd spent almost a year listening to police and prosecutors describe Jones, imprisoned for armed heroin distribution, as a predator. After three months of requests, I walked along the manicured entranceway of Hazelton Federal Correctional Institution on the outskirts of Bruceton Mills, West Virginia. The air was so thick that the flags framing the concrete-block structure hung there drooping, as still as the razor wire that scalloped the roofs.

In the state's northeastern crook, bordering Pennsylvania to the north and Maryland to the east, Preston County had once been dominated by strip-mining. But by the mid-2000s, most of the mines had shut down, and the prison had taken over as the county's largest employer, with eight hundred guards and staff.

My August 2016 interview had taken several weeks to arrange with the Bureau of Prisons pecking order in Washington, D.C., but first I had to navigate weeks of curt back-and-forth with Jones, over the prison's monitored email, to get his OK. "Exactly who have you spoken to as of today that was involved with my case?" he wanted to know. What personal information about him did I intend to use?

Jones agreed to let me visit, finally, because he wanted his daughters, in kindergarten and first grade when their dad was arrested in June 2013, to understand "there's a different side of me," as he put it. The last they'd seen him, a week before his arrest, he had delivered birthday cupcakes to their school.

I thought of the "tsunami of misery" Jones had first unleashed in Woodstock, Virginia, as his prosecutor put it, before it fanned out in waves over the northwestern region of the state and into some of Washington's western bedroom communities in 2012 and 2013. In just a few months'

time, Jones was presiding over the largest heroin ring in the region, transforming a handful of users into hundreds.

As I made my way to the prison, I calculated the human toll, the hundreds of addicted people who ended up dopesick when their heroin supply was suddenly cut by Jones's arrest: throwing up and sweating and shitting their pants. When Jones was jailed in 2013, many of the newly addicted Woodstock users began carpooling to the nearest big cities—Baltimore, Washington, and even Martinsburg, West Virginia, aka Little Baltimore—to score drugs, converging on known heroin hot spots and playing drug-dealer Russian roulette.

I didn't yet know that a single batch of heroin was about to land in Huntington, West Virginia, four hours west of Jones's cell, that would halt the breathing of twenty-six people in a single day, before the week was out. Those overdoses were fueled by the latest synthetic opioid, carfentanil, imported from China with a stroke on a computer keyboard. Carfentanil is an elephant sedative one hundred times stronger than fentanyl, which is twenty-five to fifty times stronger than heroin. For the fifth year in a row, the state of West Virginia's indigent burial-assistance program was about to exhaust its funds from interring opioid-overdose victims.

Similar surges were happening across the country, from Florida to Sacramento to Barre, Vermont. Every person I interviewed that summer, from treatment providers to parents of the addicted to the judges who were sending the addicted to prison or jail, was growing more burdened by the day. The enormity of America's drug problem was finally dawning on them and on the rest of us—two decades after the opioid epidemic first took root. (Although the word "opiate" historically refers to drugs derived from the opium poppy and "opioid" to chemical versions, the now more widely accepted term "opioid" is used in this book for both forms of painkillers.)

Drug overdose had already taken the lives of 300,000 Americans over the past fifteen years, and experts now predicted that 300,000 more would die in only the next five. It is now the leading cause of death for Americans under the age of fifty, killing more people than guns or car accidents, at a rate higher than the HIV epidemic at its peak.

The rate of casualties is so unprecedented that it's almost impossible to look at the total number dead—and at the doctors and mothers and teachers and foster parents who survive them—and not wonder why the nation's

response has been so slow in coming and so impotently executed when it finally did.

Ronnie Jones had run one of the largest drug rings in the mid-Atlantic United States, a region with some of the highest overdose rates in the nation. But I wasn't driving to West Virginia for epidemiological insights or even a narrative of redemption from Jones.

I'd been dispatched to prison by a specific grieving mother, clutching a portrait of her nineteen-year-old son. I wanted to understand the death of Jesse Bolstridge, a robust high school football player barely old enough to grow a patchy beard on his chin.

What exactly, his mother wanted to know, had led to the death of her only son?

I'd been trying to address that same question for more than five years, in one form or another, for several mothers I knew. But now I had someone I could ask.

Three months before visiting Jones, in the spring of 2016, Kristi Fernandez and I stood next to Jesse's grave on a rolling hillside in Strasburg, Virginia, in the shadow of Signal Knob. She'd asked me to meet her at one of her regular cemetery stops, on her way home from work, so I could see how she'd positioned his marker, just so, at the edge of the graveyard.

It was possible to stand at Jesse's headstone—emblazoned with the foot-high number 55, in the same font as the lettering on his Strasburg Rams varsity jersey—and look down on the stadium where he had once summoned the crowd to its feet simply by running onto the field and pumping his arms.

In a small town where football is as central to identity as the nearby Civil War battlefields dotting the foothills of the Blue Ridge, Jesse loved nothing more than making the hometown crowd roar.

He had always craved movement, the choke on his internal engine revving long after his peers had mastered their own. As a toddler, he staunchly refused to nap, succumbing to sleep on the floor midplay, an action figure in one hand and a toy car in the other. This restlessness was part of the epidemic's story, too, I would later learn. So were the drugs

Jesse's high school buddies pilfered from their parents' and grandparents' medicine cabinets—the kind of leftovers that pile up after knee-replacement surgery or a blown back.

Jesse had been a ladies' man, the boy next door, a jokester who began most of his sentences with the word “Dude.” When he left his house on foot, the neighbors did a double take, marveling at the trail of cats shadowing him as he walked.

Kristi pointed out the cat's paw she had engraved at the base of Jesse's headstone, right next to the phrase MISS YOU MORE, a family shorthand they had the habit of using whenever they talked by phone.

“I miss you,” she'd say.

“Miss you more,” he'd tell her.

“Miss *you* more,” she'd answer. And on and on.

Kristi takes pride in the way the family maintains Jesse's grave, switching out the holiday decorations, adding kitschy trinkets, wiping away the rain-splashed mud. “It's the brightest one here,” his younger twin sisters like to say as they sweep away the errant grass clippings.

When I pulled into the cemetery for our first meeting, Kristi had taken it as an omen that my license plate included Jesse's number, 55. She's always looking for signs from Jesse—a glint of sun shining through the clouds, a Mother's Day brunch receipt for \$64.55. To her, my license plate number meant our meeting was Jesse-sanctioned and Jesse-approved.

Kristi used to think that maintaining Jesse's grave was “the last thing we can do for him,” she told me, choking back tears. But right now she's obsessed with the story of her son's swift descent into addiction—the missing details that might explain how Jesse went from being a high school football hunk and burly construction worker to a heroin-overdose statistic, slumped on someone else's bathroom floor. If she understood the progression of his addiction better, she reasons, maybe she could help other parents protect their kids from stumbling down that same path.

“I just want to be able to say, ‘This is what happened to Jesse,’ so I can be educated, so I can help others,” Kristi says. “But in my mind, the story doesn't add up, and it drives me crazy.”

Maybe a mother's questions about a child's death can never be totally answered, and yet Kristi's pain sits there between us, no less urgent today

than it felt on the day he died. To comprehend how she was left with these questions—and how our country came to this moment—I needed to widen the scope of my investigation both in geography and in time. I would fold in questions from other mothers, too, who wanted to understand why their addicted sons were imprisoned now instead of in treatment; why their addicted daughters were still out on the streets, God only knew where.

When a new drug sweeps the country, it historically starts in the big cities and gradually spreads to the hinterlands, as in the cases of cocaine and crack. But the opioid epidemic began in exactly the opposite manner, grabbing a toehold in isolated Appalachia, Midwestern rust belt counties, and rural Maine. Working-class families who were traditionally dependent on jobs in high-risk industries to pay their bills—coal mining in southwest Virginia, steel milling in western Pennsylvania, logging in Maine—weren't just the first to experience the epidemic of drug overdose; they also happened to live in politically unimportant places, hollows and towns and fishing villages where the treatment options were likely to be hours from home.

Jesse Bolstridge was born in the mid-1990s, when opioid addiction first took root. His short life represents the arc of the epidemic's toll, the apex of which is nowhere close to being reached.

If I could retrace the epidemic as it shape-shifted across the spine of the Appalachians, roughly paralleling Interstate 81 as it fanned out from the coalfields and crept north up the Shenandoah Valley, I could understand how prescription pill and heroin abuse was allowed to fester, moving quietly and stealthily across this country, cloaked in stigma and shame.

Set in three culturally distinct communities that represent the evolution of the epidemic as I reported it, *Dopesick* begins in the coalfields, in the hamlet of St. Charles, Virginia, in the remote westernmost corner of the state, largely with the introduction of the painkiller OxyContin in 1996.

From there, the scourge not only advanced into new territories but also arrived via a different delivery system, as the morphine molecule shifted from OxyContin and other painkillers like Vicodin and Percocet to heroin, the pills' illicit twin, and, later, even stronger synthetic analogs.

As the epidemic gained strength, it sent out new geographic shoots, moving from predominantly rural areas to urban and suburban settings, though the pattern was never stable or fixed. Heroin landed in the suburbs and cookie-cutter subdivisions near my home in Roanoke in the mid-2000s. But it wasn't widely acknowledged until a prominent jeweler and civic leader, Ginger Mumpower, drove her addicted son to the federal prison where he would spend the next five years, for his role in a former classmate's overdose death.

I covered Spencer Mumpower's transition from private-school student to federal inmate at the same time I witnessed the rise in overdose deaths spread north along I-81 from Roanoke. It infected pristine farm pastures and small northern Shenandoah Valley towns, as more users, and increasingly vigilant medical and criminal justice systems, propelled the addicted onto the urban corridor from Baltimore to New York. If you live in a city, maybe you've seen the public restroom with a sharps container, or witnessed a librarian administer Narcan.

While more and more Americans die of drug overdose, it is impossible to not look back at the early days of what we now recognize as an epidemic and wonder what might have been done to slow or stop it. Kristi Fernandez's questions are not hers alone. Until we understand how we reached this place, America will remain a country where getting addicted is far easier than securing treatment.

The worst drug epidemic in American history didn't land in the bucolic northern Shenandoah Valley until 2012, when Ronnie Jones, a twice-convicted drug dealer from the Washington suburbs, arrived in the back of a Virginia Department of Corrections van and set about turning a handful of football players, tree trimmers, and farmers' kids who used pills recreationally into hundreds of heroin addicts, as police officers told the story.

The transition here, in the quiet town of Woodstock, was driven by the same twisted math I'd witnessed elsewhere, as many users began with prescriptions, then resorted to buying heroin from dealers and selling portions of their supply to fuel their next purchase. Because the most

important thing for the morphine-hijacked brain is, always, not to experience the crushing physical and psychological pain of withdrawal: to avoid dopesickness at any cost.

To feed their addictions, many users recruit new customers. Who eventually recruit new customers. And the exponential growth continues until the cycle too often ends in jail or prison or worse—in a premature grave like Jesse’s adorned with teddy bears, R2-D2 action figures, and the parting words of mothers like Kristi engraved in granite: UNTIL I TAKE MY FINAL BREATH, YOU WILL LIVE IN MY HEART.

To reach Ronnie Jones, I head north on the nearest “heroin highway,” I-81. I travel roughly the same path in my car, only in reverse, that Jones’s drugs did by bus, his heroin camouflaged inside Pringle’s cans and plastic Walmart bags on the floor beside him or his hired drug runners.

On the suburban outskirts of Roanoke, I drive near the upper-middle-class subdivision of Hidden Valley, where a young woman I’ve been following for a year named Tess Henry was once a straight-A student and basketball star. At the moment, she’s AWOL—her mother and I have no idea where she is—although sometimes we catch glimpses of her on our cellphones: a Facebook exchange between Tess and one of her heroin dealers, or a prostitution ad through which Tess will fund her next fix.

I pass Ginger’s Jewelry, the high-end store where parents of the addicted still drive from two hours away simply because they can think of nowhere else to turn. They’ve read about Ginger’s imprisoned son in the newspaper, and they want to ask her how to handle the pitfalls of raising an addicted child.

Up the Shenandoah Valley on the interstate, I pass New Market and think not of the men who fought in the famous 1864 Civil War battle but of the women who grew poppies for the benefit of wounded soldiers, harvesting morphine from the dried juice inside the seed pods. Three decades later, the German elixir peddlers at Bayer Laboratories would stock America’s drugstores with a brand-new version of that same molecule, a pill marketed as both a cough remedy and a cure for the nation’s soaring morphine epidemic, known as “morphinism,” or soldier’s disease. Its label

looked like an amusement advertisement you might have seen on a circus poster, a word derived from the German for “heroic” and bracketed by a swirling ribbon frame: heroin. It was sold widely from drugstore counters, no prescription necessary, not only for veterans but also for women with menstrual cramps and babies with hiccups.

Outside Woodstock, I pass George’s Chicken, the poultry-processing plant where Ronnie Jones first arrived to work in a Department of Corrections work-release program, clad in prison-issue khakis. I pass the house nearby where a cop I know spent days, nights, and weekends crouched under a bedroom window, surveilling Jones and his co-workers from behind binoculars—a fraction of the man-hours the government invested in putting members of Jones’s heroin ring behind bars.

I head northwest toward West Virginia, the crumbling landscape like so many of the distressed towns I’ve already traversed in Virginia some four hundred miles south, down to the same HILLARY FOR PRISON signs and the same Confederate flags waving presciently from their posts.

At the prison, I park my car and walk through the heavy front door. A handler named Rachel ushers me through security, making cheerful small talk as we head deeper inside the concrete maze and through three different sets of locked doors, her massive cluster of keys reverberating like chimes at each checkpoint.

We pass through a recreation area, where several men—all but one of the prisoners black and brown, I can’t help noticing—push mops and brooms around the cavernous room, looking up and nodding as we pass. The manufactured air inside is cold, and it smells of Clorox.

Ronnie Jones is already waiting for me on the other side of the last locked door, seated at a table. He looks thinner and older than he did in his mug shot, his prison khakis baggy, his trim Afro and beard flecked with gray. He looks tired, and the whites of his eyes are tinged with red.

He rises from the chair to shake my hand, then sits back down, his hands folded into a steeple, his elbows resting on the table between us. His mood is unreadable.

The glassed-in room is beige, the floors are beige, and so is Rachel, in her beige-and-blue uniform and no-nonsense shoes, the kind you could run in if you had to. She tells us to knock on the window if we need her, then

leaves for her perch in the rec room, on the other side of the window, the door lock clicking decisively behind her.

I open my notebook, situate the questions I've prepared off to the side, next to my spare pens. I'm thinking of Kristi and Ginger and of Tess's mom, and what Jones might say that will explain the fate of these mothers' kids.

Jones leans forward, expectant and unsmiling, and rubs his hands together, as if we're business associates sitting down to hammer out a deal.

Then he takes a deep breath and, relaxing back into his chair, he waits for me to start.

OceanofPDF.com

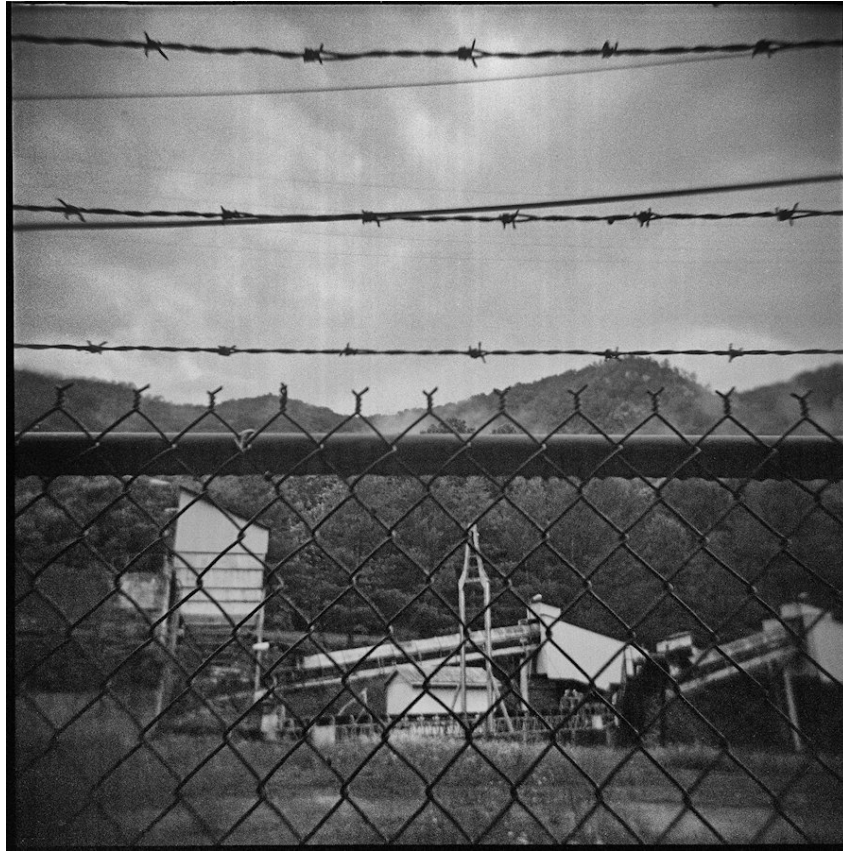
Part One

The People v. Purdue



Pennington Gap, Lee County, Virginia

OceanofPDF.com



Former coal-mining facility, Lee County, Virginia

Chapter One

The United States of Amnesia

Though the opioid epidemic would go on to spare no segment of America, nowhere has it settled in and extracted as steep a toll as in the depressed

former mill and mining communities of central Appalachia, where the desperate and jobless rip copper wire out of abandoned factories to resell on the black market and jimmy large-screen TVs through a Walmart garden-center fence crack to keep from “fiending for dope.”

In a region where few businesses dare to set up shop because it’s hard to find workers who can pass a drug test, young parents can die of heroin overdose one day, leaving their untended baby to succumb to dehydration and starvation three days later.

Appalachia was among the first places where the malaise of opioid pills hit the nation in the mid-1990s, ensnaring coal miners, loggers, furniture makers, and their kids. Two decades after the epidemic erupted, Princeton researchers Anne Case and Angus Deaton were the first economists to sound the alarm. Their bombshell analysis in December 2015 showed that mortality rates among white Americans had quietly risen a half-percent annually between the years 1999 and 2013 while midlife mortality continued to fall in other affluent countries. “Half a million people are dead who should not be dead,” Deaton told the *Washington Post*, blaming the surge on suicides, alcohol-related liver disease, and drug poisonings—predominantly opioids—which the economists later referred to as “diseases of despair.” While the data from which Case and Deaton draw is not restricted to deaths by drug overdose, their central finding of “a marked increase in the all-cause mortality of middle-aged white non-Hispanic men and women” demonstrates that the opioid epidemic rests inside a host of other diseases of despair statistically significant enough to reverse “decades of progress in mortality.”

At roughly the same time the Case and Deaton study was published, a Kaiser Family Foundation poll showed that 56 percent of Americans now knew someone who abused, was addicted to, or died from an overdose of opioids. Nationwide, the difference in life expectancy between the poorest fifth of Americans by income and the richest fifth widened from 1980 to 2010 by thirteen years. For a long time, it was assumed that the core driver of this differential was access to health care and other protective benefits of relative wealth. But in Appalachia, those disparities are even starker, with overdose mortality rates 65 percent higher than in the rest of the nation. Clearly, the problem wasn’t just of some people dying sooner; it was of white Americans dying in their prime.

The story of how the opioid epidemic came to change this country begins in the mid to late 1990s, in Virginia's westernmost point, in the pie-shaped county sandwiched between Tennessee and Kentucky, a place closer to eight other state capitals than its own, in Richmond. Head north as the crow flies from the county seat of Jonesville and you'll end up west of Detroit.

Geopolitically, Lee County was the ultimate flyover region, hard to access by car, full of curvy, two-lane roads, and dotted with rusted-out coal tipples. It was the precise point in America where politicians were least likely to hold campaign rallies or pretend to give a shit—until the unchecked epidemic finally landed on their couches, too.

Four hundred miles away, at the northern end of the Shenandoah Valley, a stressed-out preschool teacher would tell Kristi Fernandez around this time that her four-year-old son, Jesse, was too rambunctious for his own good. He was causing mayhem in the classroom, so Kristi took him to his pediatrician, who urged her to put him on Ritalin. She acquiesced two years later, the drug seemed to quell his jitters and anxiety, and the teacher complaints stopped.

But he was still her high-energy Jesse. You could tell he was hyper even by the way he signed his name, blocking the letters out joyfully and haphazardly, adding a stick-figure drawing of the sun with a smiley face below the first *E*. The sun's rays stuck out helter-skelter, like a country boy's cowlick, as if it were running and winking at you all at once.

Lieutenant Richard Stallard was making his usual rounds, patrolling through Bullitt Park in Big Stone Gap in Wise County near the Lee County line. This was the same iconic small town romanticized in Adriana Trigiani's novel and film *Big Stone Gap*, the one based on her idyllic upbringing in the 1970s, when a self-described town spinster with the good looks of Ashley Judd could spend her days wandering western Virginia's hills and hollows, delivering prescriptions for her family-run pharmacy without a thought of danger.

The year was 1997, a pivotal moment in the history of opioid addiction, and Stallard was about to sound the first muffled alarm. Across central

Appalachia's coal country, people hadn't yet begun locking their toolsheds and barn doors as a guard against those addicted to OxyContin, looking for anything to steal to fund their next fix.

The region was still referred to as the coalfields, even though coal-mining jobs had long been in steep decline. It had been three decades since President Lyndon Johnson squatted on the porch of a ramshackle house just a few counties west, having a chat with an unemployed sawmiller that led him to launch his War on Poverty, which resulted in bedrock social programs like food stamps, Medicaid, Medicare, and Head Start. But poverty remained very much with the coalfields the day Stallard had his first brush with a new and powerful painkiller. Whereas half the region lived in poverty in 1964 and hunger abounded, it now held national records for obesity, disability rates, and drug diversion, the practice of using and/or selling prescriptions for nonmedical purposes.

If fat was the new skinny, pills were becoming the new coal.

Stallard was sitting in his patrol car in the middle of the day when a familiar face appeared. An informant he'd been working with for years had some fresh intel. At the time, the area's most commonly diverted opioids were Lortab and Percocet, both of which sold on the streets for \$10 a pill. Up until now, the most expensive painkiller of the bunch had been Dilaudid, the brand name for hydromorphone, a morphine derivative that sold on the black market for \$40.

The informant leaned into Stallard's cruiser. "This feller up here's got this new stuff he's selling. It's called Oxy, and he says it's great," he said.

"What is it again?" Stallard asked.

"It's *Oxy-compton*...something like that."

Pill users were already misusing it to intensify their high, the informant explained, as well as selling it on the black market. Oxy came in much higher dosages than standard painkillers, and an 80-milligram tablet sold for \$80, making its potential for black-market sales much higher than that of Dilaudid and Lortab. The increased potency made the drug a cash cow for the company that manufactured it, too.

The informant had more specifics: Users had already figured out an end run around the pill's time-release mechanism, a coating stamped with OC and the milligram dosage. They simply popped a tablet in their mouths for a

minute or two, until the rubberized coating melted away, then rubbed it off on their shirts. Forty-milligram Oxys left an orange sheen on their shirtsleeves, the 80-milligrams a tinge of green. The remaining tiny pearl of pure oxycodone could be crushed, then snorted or mixed with water and injected.

The euphoria was immediate and intense, with a purity similar to that of heroin. Stallard wondered what was coming next. In the early nineties, Colombian cartels had increased the potency of the heroin they were selling in urban markets to increase their market share—the goal being to attract needle-phobic users who preferred snorting over injecting. But as tolerance to the stronger heroin increased, the snorters overcame their aversion to needles and soon became IV heroin users.

As soon as Stallard got back to the station, he picked up the phone.

The town pharmacist on the other line was incredulous: “Man, we only just got it a month or two ago. And you’re telling me it’s *already* on the street?”

The pharmacist had read the FDA-approved package insert for OxyContin. Most pain pills lasted only four hours, but OxyContin was supposed to provide steady relief three times as long, giving people in serious pain the miracle of uninterrupted sleep. In an early concession to the potential for its abuse, the makers of OxyContin claimed the slow-release delivery mechanism would frustrate drug abusers chasing a euphoric rush.

Based on Stallard’s news, the pharmacist already doubted the company’s claims: “Delayed absorption, as provided by OxyContin tablets, is believed to reduce the abuse liability of a drug.” If the town’s most experienced drug detective was calling him about it just a couple of months after the drug’s release, and if his neighbors were already walking around with their shirts stained orange and green, it was definitely being abused.

Approved by the Food and Drug Administration in late 1995, OxyContin was the brainchild of a little-known, family-owned pharmaceutical company called Purdue Frederick, based in Stamford, Connecticut. The company was virtually unheard of when a trio of research psychiatrists and brothers—Mortimer, Raymond, and Arthur Sackler—bought it from its

original Manhattan-based owners in 1952, with only a few employees and annual sales of just \$20,000. The new owners made their initial fortunes specializing in such over-the-counter products as laxatives, earwax remover, and the antiseptic Betadine, used to wash down the Apollo 11 spacecraft after its historic mission to the moon. Expanding internationally in the 1970s, the Sacklers acquired Scottish and British drug companies and paved the way for their entry into the pain-relief business with the development of an end-of-life painkiller derived from morphine, MS Contin, in 1984. (*Contin* was an abbreviation of “continuous.”) With annual sales of \$170 million, MS Contin had run its profit-making course by the mid-1990s.

As its patent was set to expire, the company launched OxyContin to fill the void, with the intention of marketing the new drug, a reformulation of the painkiller oxycodone, beyond hospice and end-of-life care. It was a tweak of a compound first developed in 1917, a form of oxycodone synthesized from thebaine, an ingredient in the Persian poppy.

Famously private, the brothers were better known for their philanthropy than for their drug-developing prowess, counting among their friends British royalty, Nobel Prize winners, and executives of the many Sackler-named art wings from the Smithsonian to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Promotion and sales were managed by the company’s marketing arm, Purdue Pharma, launched in the nation’s best-known corporate tax haven—Delaware.

Purdue Pharma touted the safety of its new opioid-delivery system everywhere its merchants went. “If you take the medicine like it is prescribed, the risk of addiction when taking an opioid is one-half of 1 percent,” said Dr. J. David Haddox, a pain specialist who became the company’s point man for the drug. Iatrogenic (or doctor-caused) addiction, in the words of a 1996 company training session for doctors, was not just unusual; it was “exquisitely rare.”

In the United States of Amnesia, as Gore Vidal once called it, there were people in history who might have expressed some skepticism about Haddox’s claim, had anyone bothered reading up on them. Ever since

Neolithic humans figured out that the juice nestled inside the head of a poppy could be dried, dehydrated, and smoked for the purposes of getting high or getting well, depending on your point of view, opium had inspired all manner of commerce and conflict. The British and Chinese fought two nineteenth-century wars over it. And opium was a chief ingredient in laudanum, the alcohol-laced tincture used to treat everything from yellow fever and cholera to headaches and general pain. In 1804, at the end of Alexander Hamilton's ill-fated duel, doctors gave him laudanum to numb the agony caused by the bullet that pierced his liver, then lodged in his vertebrae.

In the 1820s, one of Boston's leading merchants masterminded an opium-smuggling operation off the Cantonese coast, spawning millions for Boston Brahmins with the names of Cabot, Delano (as in FDR), and Forbes. This money would go on to build many of the nation's first railroads, mines, and factories.

Around that time, a twenty-one-year-old German apothecary urged caution when he published the first major opium breakthrough. Friedrich Sertürner had isolated the active ingredient inside the poppy, an alkaloid he named morphium after the Greek god of dreams, Morpheus. Sertürner quickly understood that morphine was exponentially more powerful than processed opium, noting that its side effects often progressed from euphoria to depression and nausea. He had not at all liked what the compound did to his dogs: It made them pass out drooling, only to awaken in an edgy and aggressive state, with fevers and diarrhea—the same state of withdrawal the opium-addicted in China had long referred to as “yen.” (What modern-day addicted users call dopesick or fiending, William S. Burroughs referred to as junk sick, gaping, or yenning.) “I consider it my duty to attract attention to the terrible effects of this new substance in order that calamity may be averted,” Sertürner wrote, prophetically, in 1810.

But his medical descendants were not so conscientious. Dr. Alexander Wood, the Scottish inventor of the hypodermic needle, hailed his 1853 creation by swearing that, whereas smoking or swallowing morphine caused addiction, shooting it up would not. No one mentioned Sertürner's warning decades before. It was easier to be swayed by Wood's shiny new thing.

So when doctors departed from the homes of the injured Civil War

veterans they were treating, it became standard practice to leave behind both morphine and hypodermic needles, with instructions to use as needed. An estimated hundred thousand veterans became addicted, many identifiable not by shirt smudges of orange and green but by the leather bags they carried, containing needles and morphine tablets, dangling from cords around their neck. The addiction was particularly severe among white Southerners in small cities and towns, where heartbroken wives, fathers, and mothers turned to drugs to cope with devastating war fatalities and the economic uncertainty brought on by slavery's end.

“Since the close of the war, men once wealthy, but impoverished by the rebellion, have taken to eating and drinking opium to drown their sorrows,” lamented an opium dealer in New York.

By the 1870s, injecting morphine was so popular among the upper classes in Europe and the United States that doctors used it for a variety of ailments, from menstrual pain to inflammation of the eyes. The almost total lack of regulatory oversight created a kind of Wild West for patent medicines, with morphine and opium pills available at the nearest drugstore counter, no prescription necessary. As long as a doctor initially OK'd the practice, even injected morphine was utterly accepted. Daily users were not socially stigmatized, because reliance on the drug was iatrogenic.

Morphine did generate public debate, if tepid, from a few alarm-sounding doctors. In 1884, the Virginia General Assembly considered placing regulations on over-the-counter versions of opium and morphine, a move the local newspaper denounced as “class legislation.” In response, Richmond doctor W. G. Rogers wrote an empathetic, impassioned letter urging the newspaper to reconsider its stance:

I know persons who have been opium-eaters for some years who now daily consume enough of this poison in the form of morphine to kill a half dozen robust men not used to the poison. I have heard them, with tears in their eyes, say that they wished it had never been prescribed for them, and...many of them [have] inserted into the flesh frequently during each day, in spite of the painful abscesses it often causes, until in

some instances the whole surface of the body seems to be tattooed. I have heard one exclaim with sorrow that there was no longer a place to put it. Whilst they know it is killing them, more or less rapidly, the fascination and power of the drug [are] irresistible, and it is a rare exception if they ever cease to take it as long as it can be obtained until they have poisoned themselves to death.

Should not this, then, be prevented, though the profits of [the drug-sellers] be diminished?

The legislature declined to approve the bill, considering it government overreach, which allowed the tentacles of morphinism to dig in deeper. Fourteen years later, Bayer chemist Heinrich Dreser stumbled on a treasure in the pharmaceutical archives: the work of a British chemist who in 1874 had made a little-remarked-on discovery while researching nonaddictive alternatives for morphine.

Diacetylmorphine—aka heroin—was more than twice as powerful as morphine, which was already ten times stronger than opium. At a time when pneumonia and tuberculosis were the leading causes of death and antibiotics didn't yet exist, Dreser believed he had unearthed the recipe for an elixir that would suppress coughing as effectively as codeine, an opium derivative, but without codeine's well-known addictive qualities.

He ordered one of his lab assistants to synthesize the drug. From its first clinical testing in 1897—initially on rabbits and frogs, then on himself and employees of the Bayer dye factory—Dreser understood that the new drug's commercial potential was huge.

If they could pitch heroin as a new and nonaddictive substitute for morphine, Dreser and Bayer would both strike it rich. Presenting the drug to the German medical academy the following year, Dreser praised heroin's sedative and respiration-depressing effects in treating asthma, bronchitis, and tuberculosis. It was a safe family drug, he explained, suitable for baby colic, colds, influenza, joint pain, and other ailments. It not only helped clear a cough, it also seemed to strengthen respiration—and it was a sure cure, Bayer claimed, for alcoholism and morphine abuse.

Bayer's company doctor chimed in, assuring his fellow physicians: "I have treated many patients for weeks with heroin, without one observation

that it may lead to dependency.” Free samples were mailed to American and European physicians by the thousands, along with testimonials that “addiction can scarce be possible.”

By 1899, Bayer was cranking out a ton of heroin a year and selling it in twenty-three countries. In the United States, cough drops and even baby-soothing syrups were laced with heroin, ballyhooed at a time when typical opioid consumers were by now not only war veterans but also middle-aged barbers and teachers, shopkeepers and housewives. Many were mostly functioning, doctor-approved users, able to hide their habits—as long as their supply remained steady, and as long as they didn’t overdo.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the pendulum began to swing the other way as a few prominent doctors started to call out their overprescribing peers. Addressing the New York Academy of Medicine in 1895, a Brooklyn doctor warned colleagues that leaving morphine and syringes behind with patients, with instructions to use whenever they felt pain, was “almost criminal,” given that some were becoming hooked after only three or four doses. “Many cases of the morphine habit could have been avoided had the family physician not given the drug in the first place,” he said. By 1900, more than 250,000 Americans were addicted to opium-derived painkillers.

And yet heroin’s earliest years were mostly full of praise, as medical journals heralded Bayer’s new cough suppressant, considering it distinctly superior to and apart from morphine, some promoting it as a morphine-replacement drug. Though a few researchers warned about possible addiction—“the toxic properties of the drug are not thoroughly known,” one noted in 1900—for eight years you could buy heroin at any American drugstore or by mail order.

In 1906, the American Medical Association finally sounded a sterner alarm: “The habit is readily formed and leads to the most deplorable results.” Heroin-related admissions to hospitals in New York and Philadelphia were rising by the 1910s and 1920s, and it was dawning on officials that addiction was skyrocketing among both the injured and recreational users (then called “vicious,” meaning their use rose from the

world of vice). Soldier's disease, in the words of New York City's commissioner of health, had now become "the American Disease."

The Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914 severely restricted the sale and possession of heroin and other narcotic drugs, and by 1924 the manufacture of heroin was outlawed, twenty-six years after Bayer's pill came to market. By the thirties, typical heroin users were working-class, and many of them were children of immigrants, along with a growing number of jazz musicians and other creative types, all now reliant on criminal drug networks to feed their vicious habit—and keep their dopesickness at bay. The addicted were now termed "junkies," inner-city users who supported their habit by collecting and selling scrap metal. The "respectable" upper- and middle-class opium and morphine addicts having died out, the remaining addicted were reclassified as criminals, not patients.

Gone and buried were the doctor-addicted opioid users once common, especially in small towns—think of Harper Lee's morphine-addicted eccentric, Mrs. Dubose, from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or the morphine-addicted mother who inspired Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Think of the "Des Moines woman [who] gave her husband morphine to cure him of chewing tobacco," as one newspaper chortled. "It cured him, but she is doing her own spring planting."

Think of the time in 1914, decades before the term "neonatal abstinence syndrome" was coined (to describe the withdrawal of a baby born drug-dependent), when a Washington official wrote that it was "almost unbelievable that anyone for the sake of a few dollars would concoct for infant use a pernicious mixture containing...morphine, codeine, opium, cannabis indica, and heroin, which are widely advertised and which are accompanied by the assertion that they 'contain nothing injurious to the youngest babe.'"

Below the story, on the same newspaper page, appeared an ad for an opium "sanitorium," a sprawling Victorian home in Richmond in which Dr. H. L. Devine promised that he could cure opium addiction in ten days to three weeks.

But the yellowed newspaper warnings would become moot, like so many historical footnotes—destined to repeat themselves as soon as they receded from living memory.

Despite all the technical, medical, and political sophistication developed over the past century, despite the regulatory initiatives and the so-called War on Drugs, few people batted an eye in the late 1990s as a new wave of opioid addiction crept onto the prescription pads of America's doctors, then morphed into an all-out epidemic of OxyContin's chemical cousin: Heinrich Dreser's drug.

No one saw the train wreck coming—not the epidemiologists, not the criminologists, not even the scholars who for decades had dissected the historical arc of *Papaver somniferum*, the opium poppy.

Like Alexander Wood promoting his syringes, and Dreser with his sleepy frogs, Purdue Pharma's David Haddox touted OxyContin for all kinds of chronic pain, not just cancer, and claimed it was safe and reliable, with addiction rates of less than 1 percent. Haddox heralded that statistic to the new army of pharmaceutical sales reps Purdue Pharma hired. They fanned out to evangelize to doctors and dentists in all fifty states with this message: Prescribing OxyContin for pain was the moral, responsible, and compassionate thing to do—and not just for dying people with stage-four cancer but also for folks with moderate back injuries, wisdom-tooth surgery, bronchitis, and temporomandibular joint disorder, or TMJ.

The 1996 introduction of OxyContin coincided with the moment in medical history when doctors, hospitals, and accreditation boards were adopting the notion of pain as “the fifth vital sign,” developing new standards for pain assessment and treatment that gave pain equal status with blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate, and temperature. The seismic shift toward thinking of patients as health care consumers was already under way, as patients now rated their health care experiences in formal surveys, Press Ganey the largest among them, and doctors and hospitals alike competed to see who could engender the highest scores, incentivizing nurses and doctors to treat pain liberally or risk losing reimbursements. In 1999, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), the nonprofit health care and hospital accreditation body, took the idea a step further, approving new mandatory standards for the assessment and treatment of pain.

The next year, Purdue's bean counters gushed about the prospects: “This

presents Purdue with the opportunity to provide true value-added services as the ‘pain experts’ in this key area,” read the company’s budget plan. “We have an opportunity to be seen as a leader in helping hospitals meet the JCAHO requirements in this area through the development of pain assessment and pain management materials geared to the hospital setting.”

To underscore such opportunities, the company planned to pass out \$300,000 worth of OxyContin-branded scroll pens, \$225,000 worth of OxyContin resource binders, and \$290,000 worth of “Pain: The Fifth Vital Sign” wall charts and clipboards. With any luck, every nurse and doctor would soon be wandering the hospital halls, their name badges dangling from a Purdue-branded lanyard.

A 2000 *New York Times* article reflected the new and widespread view among the vast majority of health care experts that pain had been grossly undertreated for too long. It featured the story of an older woman in a nursing home who’d been left to writhe in pain, given only Tylenol for the relief of her severe osteoporosis and pulmonary disease. The story demonstrated the growing concern that pain was woefully mismanaged due to outdated notions about addiction: “Many health care workers still erroneously believe that adequate pain relief can leave patients addicted to the drugs.”

But what exactly was adequate pain relief? That point was unaddressed. Nor could anyone define it. No one questioned whether the notion of pain, invisible to the human eye, could actually be measured simply by asking the patient for his or her subjective opinion. Quantifying pain made it easy to standardize procedures, but experts would later concede that it was objective only in appearance—transition labor and a stubbed toe could both measure as a ten, depending on a person’s tolerance. And not only did reliance on pain scales not correlate with improved patient outcomes, it also had the effect of increasing opioid prescribing and opioid abuse.

“Every single physician I knew at the time was told to be much more serious about making pain a priority,” said Dr. John Burton, the head of emergency medicine for Carilion Clinic, the largest medical provider in western Virginia. “All it did was drive up our opioid prescribing without really understanding the consequences of what we were doing.

“I can remember telling my residents, ‘A patient can’t get hooked on fourteen days’ worth of [opioid] pills.’ And I was absolutely wrong.”

The Press Ganey survey upped the pressure, recalled an emergency-room doctor who practiced in St. Louis. “We quickly found that drug-seeking patients or others sending off vibes we didn’t like would give us bad reviews,” remembered Dr. David Davis. “When you’re really busy and interrupted all the time with seriously sick patients, it’s so easy to give them an IV dose of Dilaudid or morphine, and kinda kick the can down the road.

“I did it myself, though I knew it was not the right thing to do. It was pushed on us big time, the idea that they can’t become addicted if you’re using opioids to treat legitimate pain. The advent of the pain score, we now think, got patients used to the idea that zero pain was the goal, whereas now doctors focus more on function if the pain score is three or four.”

Compared with the New Zealand hospitals where Davis worked earlier in his career—often prescribing physical therapy, anti-inflammatories, biofeedback, or acupuncture as a first-line measure—American insurance companies in the age of managed care were more likely to cover opioid pills, which were not only cheaper but also considered a much quicker fix.

Little did Davis or the other ER docs understand that the routine practice of sending patients home with a two-week supply of oxycodone or hydrocodone would culminate by the year 2017 in a financial toll of \$1 trillion as measured in lost productivity and increased health care, social services, education, and law enforcement costs.

Throughout OxyContin’s earliest years, only a few voices of dissent rose to remind doctors that, historically, there had been risks associated with prescribing narcotics, and even those warnings were timid. Dartmouth medical school substance abuse researcher Dr. Seddon R. Savage argued that addiction risks for pain patients on narcotics tended to increase the longer the patients used the drugs. “It is tempting to dismiss all concerns regarding therapeutic opioid use as irrelevant,” she wrote in a physician journal in 1996. “That would clearly be a mistake.” A colleague argued in the same paper that there simply wasn’t enough good data available to make a case for or against liberal opiate prescribing.

The first real dissent would come soon, though, in the unlikely form of a country doctor and one thoroughly pissed-off Catholic-nun-turned-drug

counselor. Though Dr. Art Van Zee and his colleague Sister Beth Davies would sound the epidemic's first sentinel alarm from Appalachia, they were greeted with the same indifference as the Richmond doctor who demanded prompt action to curb the rampant use of opioids in 1884, and the inventor of morphine, who strongly urged caution in 1810. Their outsider status disguised both the depth and the relevance of their knowledge.

OceanofPDF.com



Evidence room, Lee County Sheriff's Office

Chapter Two

Swag 'n' Dash

Around the time the Big Stone Gap informant was leaning into the police officer's cruiser, the FDA loosened rules on pharmaceutical ads, allowing drugmakers to air detailed television ads touting specific medical claims for

nonnarcotic drugs. Drug advertising ballooned from \$360 million in 1995 to \$1.3 billion in 1998, and nearly all pharmaceutical companies spent more plying doctors with freebies. At a time when there were scant industry or federal guidelines regulating the promotion of prescription drugs, the new sales strategies pushed the narrative of curing every ill with a pill and emboldened many patients to seek medicines unnecessarily.

From a sales perspective, OxyContin had its greatest early success in rural, small-town America—already full of shuttered factories and Dollar General stores, along with burgeoning disability claims. Purdue handpicked the physicians who were most susceptible to their marketing, using information it bought from a data-mining network, IMS Health, to determine which doctors in which towns prescribed the most competing painkillers. If a doctor was already prescribing lots of Percocet and Vicodin, a rep was sent out to deliver a pitch about OxyContin’s potency and longer-lasting action. The higher the decile—a term reps use as a predictor of a doctor’s potential for prescribing whatever drug they’re hawking—the more visits that doctor received from a rep, who often brought along “reminders” such as OxyContin-branded clocks for the exam-room walls.

The reminders were as steady as an alarm clock permanently set to snooze. Purdue’s growing legion of OxyContin apostles was now expected to make more than a million calls annually on doctors in hospitals and offices, targeting the top prescriber deciles and family doctors, and aggressively promoting the notion that OxyContin was safe for noncancer patients with low back pain, osteoarthritis, and injury and trauma pain.

The practice became standard in rural Virginia towns like Big Stone Gap, Lebanon, and St. Charles—places that already claimed higher numbers, per capita, of dislocated workers and work-related disability claims. Now Purdue reps were navigating the winding roads and hilly towns in company-rented Ford Explorers, some pulling down annual bonuses of \$70,000—the higher the milligrams a doctor prescribed, the larger the bonus. And they were remarkably adept. Five years earlier, cancer doctors had been by far the biggest prescribers of long-acting opioids, but by 2000 the company’s positioning goals had been nailed, with family doctors now the largest single group of OxyContin prescribers.

Industrywide, pharmaceutical companies spent \$4.04 *billion* in direct marketing to doctors in 2000, up 64 percent from 1996. To get in the doctor's door, to get past the receptionist and head nurse, the reps came bearing gifts, from Valentine's Day flowers to coupons for mani-pedis.

The average sales rep's most basic tool was Dine 'n' Dash, a play on the juvenile-delinquent prank of leaving a restaurant without paying the bill. For a chance to pitch their wonder drug, reps had long offered free dinners at fancy restaurants. But soon, to-go options abounded, too, for a busy doctor's convenience. Reps began coming by before holidays to drop off a turkey or beef tenderloin that a doctor could take home to the family—even a Christmas tree. Driving home from the office, doctors were also invited to stop by the nearest gas station to get their tanks topped off—while listening to a drug rep's pitch at the pump, a variation the reps nicknamed Gas 'n' Go. In the spring, the takeout menu featured flowers and shrubs, in a version some dubbed—you guessed it—Shrubbery 'n' Dash.

There seemed to be no end to the perks, or to the cloying wordplay: At a bookstore event titled Look for a Book, an invitation issued by SmithKline Beecham asked doctors to “come pick out the latest book about your favorite hobby or travel destination!” Purdue reps were heavily incentivized, buoyed by \$20,000 cash prizes and luxury vacations for top performers and a corporate culture that employed terminology from the Middle Ages to pump up its foot soldiers. Internal documents referred to reps as royal crusaders and knights, and supervisors went by such nicknames as the Wizard of OxyContin, the Supreme Sovereign of Pain Management, and the Empress of Analgesia. Purdue's head of pain care sales signed his memos simply “King.”

Physicians willing to submit to reps' pitches were routinely given not just branded pens and Post-it notes but also swing-music recordings labeled “Swing in the Right Direction” and freebie pedometers with the message that OxyContin was “A Step in the Right Direction.”

A chain-smoking doctor in Bland, Virginia, was so blatantly in favor of graft that she posted a signup sheet in her office, soliciting reps to sponsor her daughter's upcoming birthday party at Carowinds, an amusement park—and one (not a Purdue rep) did. She even accepted cartons of cigarettes emblazoned with a sticker for Celexa, the antidepressant manufactured by Forest Laboratories: another gift from another clever rep.

Steve Huff was in medical residency training in the mid-1990s when he sampled his first taste of pharmaceutical swag—and not just by way of stickers, golf balls, and pens adorned with drug company names. “We were impressionable young doctors, fresh meat with a lifetime of prescribing ahead, and they flocked to us,” he told me. “They took us golfing. It was standard to have a free lunch most days of the week because the drug companies were always buying, then you’d have a short educational seminar going on [about their drugs] while you ate.”

By the time he progressed to a family practice, Huff decided the free meals were wrong and said so repeatedly, making a show of retrieving his cold leftovers from home from the office fridge, he told me. When he set about trying to coax the other doctors in his practice to ban the lunches, they demurred, saying the staff would be so disappointed if we “took away their free meals,” Huff said.

The reps tended to be outgoing, on the youngish side of middle-aged, and very good-looking. “They were bubbly, they’d flirt a little bit, and it really would make you feel special. And yet intertwined in all those feelings is the name of a drug, which the rep is repeating over and over while you’re eating this delicious, savory meal. And even if you say you’re not swayed by such things, there is no doubt in my mind that you’re more than likely to prescribe it,” Huff added.

Huff didn’t fall for the reps’ pitches; in fact, he stopped accepting pharmaceutical gifts altogether, even Post-it notes and pens. At his first family medicine practice, in Stuart, Virginia, Huff prescribed OxyContin a time or two. But most of the patients returned, as miserable as ever and still complaining about pain, he said, along with new side effects that included sleepiness, confusion, constipation, and unsteadiness on their feet. “A few of them would stay on a stable dose once it was titrated properly, but more often than not it was causing problems” both for the patients and for Huff. He noted an uptick in depression and memory loss, too, among the long-term opioid users at the practice—as well as alarming news stories about drug seekers in the community breaking into those patients’ homes or cars to steal their drugs.

When he moved his practice to the Carroll County hamlet of Laurel Fork

to fill a spot left by two departing doctors in 2003, Huff was “deluged” with young-adult and middle-aged patients who’d been prescribed large amounts of OxyContin by his predecessors, concurrently with benzodiazepines such as Xanax, Klonopin, and Valium—“nerve pills,” as most in Appalachia call them. There was nothing in their charts to justify why they were getting so many prescriptions, Huff said, and he knew the added benzos put the patients at enormous risk of overdose. As one recovering addict in Lee County schooled me: “Around here, pairing an Oxy with a nerve pill—we call that the Cadillac high. If you’re gonna write this book, honey, you better learn the lingo.”

Many of Huff’s patients lived in nearby Galax, a factory town that had just witnessed the closing of two of its largest employers, Hanesbrands clothing and Webb Furniture, and continued downsizings in the town’s remaining plants. In the wake of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement and China’s entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, many of the sewing factories and furniture plants were gravitating to cheaper-wage countries south of the border and in Asia.

OxyContin wasn’t just numbing pain and the depression that came along with it; the drug was now its own resource to be plundered. “You could get a big bottle of eighty-milligram tablets and sell them for a dollar a milligram, and you could pretty much live on that for a month,” Huff said.

Until Huff slammed the brakes on the Laurel Fork narcotics train.

“People freaked out on me,” he recalled. They were sick and in withdrawal, some of them not yet understanding they were addicted.

“Just about every day I was having to go in and face another ten people, and tell most of them, ‘I’m discontinuing your narcotics.’ It was really strenuous. It drained me,” he remembered.

One period was so awful that he got in his car and drove to Mississippi to see his sister for a long weekend. Two patients had threatened his life that week.

To one of the region’s longtime health-department directors, Dr. Sue Cantrell, a former pharmacist, the premiere of OxyContin could not have been timed worse. With the exception of mining, production jobs in the

coalfields had never paid much. Cantrell remembered setting up a mobile clinic in the parking lot of the Buster Brown apparel factory in the early 1990s because the women who worked there did piecework—they were paid by the number of sewn pieces they produced—and they had zero sick leave. “They couldn’t leave work to have a pap smear or a breast exam, so we took the clinic to them,” Cantrell recalled.

“Even though the pay wasn’t great, those [production] jobs gave two things to our communities: One, families on the margin didn’t always have to be on the brink of not having food on the table or money for utilities. And the second, more important thing was the behavior it modeled for families, where people got up in the morning and went to work. A lot of people never finished high school, just like the people who went into the mines, but they used to have a source of income before it dried up to nothing—and there have been no jobs to replace those,” she said. Jobs in coal mining, once the number-one industry in central Appalachia, were cut in half between 1983 and 2012, owing to pollution regulations and competition from natural gas and cheaper low-sulfur coal out west. Automation in mining and the closings of factories that burned coal for power also contributed to the region’s decline.

The closings were just sinking in when Cantrell took her first call about OxyContin from a doctor in tiny St. Charles, the next-to-poorest town (population 159 and waning) in the poorest county in the state.

Tall and skinny, Dr. Art Van Zee stood out. He was a Vanderbilt-educated minister’s son from Nevada who spoke softly, with no discernible accent. He’d come to the region in 1976 at the age of twenty-nine because he wanted to work in a medically underserved community. The town’s new federally qualified community center, with its sliding-fee scale, was as close to the socialized medicine model he admired as he could find.

That’s where he met his wife, Sue Ella Kobak, a firecracker lawyer and activist, a coal miner’s daughter raised in a Kentucky coal camp just over the mountain in Poor Bottom Hollow. Introduced by mutual friends, the two had their first real date at an NAACP rally in Bristol, Virginia, called as a response to a planned KKK rally and ending with everyone holding hands and singing “We Shall Overcome.” After they married a few years later—the flower girl was a three-legged goat—most locals began referring to the pair as “Doc and that woman,” as Sue Ella tells it, because she refused to

change her name.

Van Zee seemed to have all the time in the world for his patients, never mind that he worked sixteen-hour days, rising at four in the morning to type up his patient notes from the previous day's visits. A doctor who'd trained in Philadelphia recalled working with Van Zee during medical school and residency: "We'd rotate in and out of these big medical centers, and when we'd get back to school, it would occur to us, 'The best doctor in America is actually out in Lee County, Virginia,'" he told me.

Locals often compared Van Zee, with his salt-and-pepper beard and gangly frame, to Abraham Lincoln. If Lincoln had worn a paper clip for a tie clip to work. If Lincoln had been spotted routinely jogging on the winding mountain roads.

I had read about Van Zee in Barry Meier's deeply startling (but little-known) 2003 book, *Pain Killer*, which chronicled the country doctor's early David-versus-Goliath battle to get OxyContin off the market until it could be reformulated to be abuse-resistant. I had not yet met Van Zee in early 2016 when I ran into one of his patients coming out of a town-hall meeting on opioids sponsored by the Obama White House. She was a nurse, a recent retiree with a thirty-year-old opioid-addicted son whose life, she swears, was saved by Art Van Zee. "When his patients are admitted to the ER, he comes there and sees them no matter what time of day. When my daddy died, he came to our house at two in the morning to pronounce his death."

Tales of Van Zee's dedication are as common in Virginia's coalfields as the rusted-out coal tipples that blanket the bluffs. There was the time he bent his lanky frame into the back of an ambulance to accompany a patient in cardiac arrest for the hour-long ride to the nearest hospital. The time he was so tired from all the house calls and beeper interruptions that some neighbors found him at a train crossing inside his idling car, asleep. The time when he cracked three ribs in the middle of a birding class on his property in the shadow of Wallens Ridge—he'd heard the spectacular clang of a two-car wreck in the distance and ran toward the road, only to find one of his own patients dead and the other driver flipped over, bottles of liquor and pills scattered around his car.

Van Zee sounded the alarm about OxyContin just as its makers were on the threshold of grossing its first billion on the blockbuster drug.

And though he didn't yet know it, he would spend the remainder of his

career dealing with its aftermath—lobbying policy makers, treating the addicted, and attending funerals of the overdosed dead.

But back in the early days of OxyContin, Van Zee was as puzzled as he was concerned. He told Sue Cantrell about a new condition he'd spotted among some of his older opioid addicts—skin abscesses caused by injecting the crushed-up drug. He was beginning to think that OxyContin, especially in its 40- and 80-milligram forms, was another animal entirely from the 10-milligram Percocet pills some teenagers used recreationally on the weekends. His region had long been home to prescription drug abuse, though to a much smaller degree; before OxyContin, Van Zee treated only one to three narcotic-dependent patients a year.

But he was starting to get regular phone calls from worried parents about their young-adult kids. Jobs, homes, spouses, and children were being lost to OxyContin addiction. A banker he knew had already spent \$80,000 of his savings after his son used his credit cards to buy items he could trade for Oxys.

Down the hall from his office, a physician colleague treated a septuagenarian farmer who had owned land worth \$500,000. Within six months, the man had sold everything he had to keep his addiction fed. "It's over," he told his doctor. "The kids are gone. The wife's gone. The farm's gone."

The doctors were witnessing the same thing that Lieutenant Stallard had seen a year earlier, in 1997, on the streets. "We had always had people using Lortabs and Percocets, but they were five- or ten-milligram pills you could take every day and still function. They didn't have to have more," Stallard said.

"The difference with OxyContin was, it turned them into nonfunctioning people."

Convinced about the looming crisis, Cantrell, the region's top public health official, called the public health commissioner in Richmond in the late 1990s. "I said, look, we've had substance abuse problems for years," she

said. “But this was a new kind of chemical, much more potent than anything we’d seen from the small subset of addicts we’d had since the seventies or eighties.”

She was told it was a problem for the Department of Behavioral Health and Substance Abuse Health Services. Even though the infections put people at risk of tuberculosis, and the shared needles (and snorting straws) could hasten the spread of hepatitis C and HIV, the buck was passed. Officially, this was not a public health matter.

“Nobody would listen to her,” said Dr. Molly O’Dell, then a fellow health-department director several counties to the east. “But she was right there in the epicenter of where the pills started. She’s the first person I ever heard to name it. She called me and said, ‘Molly, I think we’ve got an epidemic down here.’”

In 1997, the Roanoke-based medical examiner counted one OxyContin death in southwest Virginia, the next year three, and the year after that sixteen.

But those numbers were inexplicably unexposed until 2001, five years after Purdue launched its drug. A Drug Enforcement Administration official told a Richmond reporter that illicit opioids were unlikely to spread beyond the mountains to the state capital, declaring southwest Virginia “a little bit unique,” although he conceded there were other Oxy-abuse hot spots in rural Maine, Cincinnati, Baltimore, and Charleston, West Virginia.

Contacted by the same Richmond reporter, a spokesman for Purdue Pharma declined to discuss the illicit use of the company’s drug.

So it happened that in the early 2000s Debbie Honaker, a happily married twenty-seven-year-old mother from the town of Lebanon, two counties to the east of Van Zee, recovered from a fairly routine gallbladder surgery with a thirty-day prescription of “Oxy tens,” followed by another script at her postsurgery checkup for another month’s supply, this time for Oxy forties. When she called to complain that her incision was still hurting, the surgeon gave her a third prescription, for 7.5-milligram Percocet, designed to quell her “breakthrough pain,” with instructions to take it not “as needed for pain” but as frequently as every two hours—concurrent with the twelve-

hour Oxys. To remind her to take the Percocet, she was supposed to set an alarm for the middle of the night.

“The doctor didn’t force me to take them,” Honaker said. “But they’re like a high-standard person, someone you’re supposed to trust and believe in. My husband and I both understood that I was supposed to take the pills every two hours.”

They have discussed that defining moment a lot in the intervening years. They’ve wondered aloud what might have happened had her gallbladder not given out at the same time the factories and mines were laying off and shutting down.

She might not have visited a neighbor, a well-known pill abuser, for advice on what to do when the pain wouldn’t subside. “If you snort ’em up your nose, they hit you better,” her neighbor told her.

She might not have found herself doubled over and dopesick the day her prescriptions ran out. “You’re throwing up. You have diarrhea. You ache so bad and you’re so irritable that you can’t stand to be touched. Your legs shake so bad you can’t sleep. You’re as ill as one hornet could ever be,” she recalled.

“And believe me, you’ll do anything to make that pain go away.”

She might not have later turned, in the throes of withdrawal, to her sixty-year-old neighbor, Margie, one of the growing legions of laid-off workers in town. Or suggested that, given Margie’s bad hip from decades of standing on hard factory floors, she should go visit the town’s so-called pain doctor and ask him to “write you”—parlance for coaxing a prescription out of a doctor by making the pain seem more debilitating than it really is. She might not have driven Margie to the appointment, then coached her on what to say.

“She didn’t want to do it,” Honaker recalled. “Margie would say, ‘God knows I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t have to choose between paying a bill or going to the doctor to get the medicines I really need,’” for diabetes and high blood pressure.

Within the span of three months, Honaker had mastered the classic drug-seeking emergency-room trick, beginning with an impassioned complaint about kidney stone pain. “I’d say, ‘My back’s killing me,’ and [in the ER bathroom] I’d pierce my finger, then put a drop of blood into my urine sample,” she recalled.

She'd leave with a prescription for Percocet. She was a full-blown opioid addict when she resorted to stealing the money her husband set aside for paying the electric bill and spending it at the office of a well-known Lebanon doctor who began most of her visits to him with the question "What do you want?"

The Board of Medicine suspended Dr. Dwight Bailey's license to practice medicine in 2014 for excessive prescribing and poor record keeping, noting that five patients had died from drug overdoses while under his care—but that was more than a decade after Honaker first came through his doors.

Honaker went on to steal painkillers from her husband's elderly grandmother. She bought pills from people who paid one dollar for their OxyContin prescriptions using their Medicaid cards. "They've got to choose to eat or pay their electric bill. But if they're on Medicaid, they can sell their drugs to supplement their income," she said.

In an Appalachian culture that prides itself on self-reliance and a feisty dose of fatalism, peddling pills was now the modern-day moonshining. Some passed the trade secrets down to their kids because, after all, how else could they afford to eat and pay their bills?

"It's our culture now, taking pills," said Crystal Street, whose father, an octogenarian, got hooked on morphine and Dilaudid in the wake of a coal-mining injury. By 2016, he was on house arrest for selling prescription pills from his nursing-home bed. "I come from a long line of distributors," Street told me.

We spoke at an addiction clinic in Lebanon, where she and Honaker were being treated with the medication-assisted treatment (MAT) drug Suboxone. Like its methadone predecessor, Suboxone staves off dopesickness, reduces cravings, and, if prescribed appropriately and used correctly, doesn't get you high.

Both middle-aged, Street and Honaker had each been jailed. They took turns telling twin near-death stories, one beginning where the other left off. They'd both lost their teeth. "You get sick and throw up. Or you leave pills

in your mouth and it takes the enamel off,” Honaker said. Neither had ever had steady work. “You couldn’t keep a job because you’d steal if you worked at a restaurant,” Street added. “Or you just couldn’t get up and go—you were too sick.”

Honaker put in: “At the end of your journey, you’re not going after drugs to get high; you’re going to keep from being sick.”

Art Van Zee saw it unfolding, and he was terrified. Within two years of the drug’s release, 24 percent of Lee High School juniors reported trying OxyContin, and so had 9 percent of the county’s seventh-graders. And Van Zee not only met with worried parents; he’d been called out to the hospital late at night about the overdose of a teenage girl he’d immunized as a baby. He remembered the exact position at the St. Charles clinic where he’d first held her. He was standing by the counter, made of materials recycled from a long-gone coal company’s commissary where coal miners once gathered to collect their pay in scrip.

The miners had portions of their pay deducted from their salary to build the clinic in 1973. They’d also organized bake sales and talent shows, and spent years soliciting donations, many of the efforts shepherded by a trio of plucky nuns who’d migrated to the region a decade earlier, heeding LBJ’s and Robert Kennedy’s call to help Appalachia fight the War on Poverty. Nicknamed the Nickel and Dime Clinic, it was literally built by coal miners and community activists, people who chipped in every penny of their spare change.

These weren’t simply Van Zee’s patients who were showing up in the ER; they were also dear friends, many of them descendants of the coal miners whose pictures lined his exam-room walls. They hailed from nearby coal camps with names like Monarch, Virginia Lee, and Bonnie Blue. When patients recognized a relative in the old black-and-white photos, Van Zee took the time to write their names down on the back of the pictures.

In the spring of 2000, small-town newspaper stories weren’t yet available online, and rural news typically didn’t travel far. Van Zee had no idea that

the force he was now wrestling with already had a hold elsewhere until a young doctor working in the clinic went home to visit relatives in the Northeast and hand carried a *Boston Globe* story back to the clinic in St. Charles. The story was headlined A PRESCRIPTION FOR CRIME.

Machias, Maine, was a remote town known for its juxtapositions—of coastal beauty and blueberries, of poverty and population decline. Its parallels to Lee County were stunning: In a region of just thirty-six thousand residents, the Washington County jail population had doubled in two years. It was overcrowded with young adults and middle-aged women and men, drug users and diverters who were facing charges of break-ins and robberies. A level of violent crime that was wholly unprecedented in the region had begun, including the firebombing of a police cruiser. The plainspoken sheriff blamed the new criminal landscape on OxyContin, and the DEA agreed, noting that Purdue’s drug was being prescribed more than twice as often as in other parts of the state.

And though OxyContin’s initial converts in Maine were fishermen and loggers, not coal miners, the results were the same:

People were “walking” prescriptions, or stealing prescriptions pads the moment a doctor turned his or her back. They were “shopping,” too—quietly soliciting concurrent prescriptions from multiple doctors. Selling prescribed pills, available for a pittance with an insurance or Medicaid card, was now seen as a viable way of paying your bills in a county where the unemployment rate hovered around 22 percent.

In a place where people had once left keys in cars and didn’t bother locking their homes, a forty-one-year-old resident told the *Globe* reporter, he now kept a loaded gun inside the house. A quarter of his former high school classmates had developed addictions to Oxy.

Van Zee’s co-worker distributed copies of the *Boston Globe* story to others in the clinic, marveling: “That’s us!”

Near the other end of the Appalachians, some eighteen hundred miles from Maine, it dawned on Van Zee and his wife that they were not alone. And they needed to get organized.

Within weeks, Van Zee had put on several public meetings under the

auspices of the Lee Coalition for Health, a grassroots group of ministers, social workers, and other community-minded people. Edited and coached by his lawyer wife, a plucky former VISTA volunteer, he wrote letters of complaint to Purdue, noting injecting patterns, frequent overdoses, abscesses, and a higher incidence of hepatitis C.

“The extent and prevalence of the problem [are] hard to overemphasize,” he wrote on August 20, 2000, in his first letter to Dr. David Haddox, then the company’s medical director, beseeching him to investigate Purdue’s prescribing patterns in the region. In another, he wrote, “My fear is that these are sentinel areas, just as San Francisco and New York were in the early years of HIV.” The company replied by sending Van Zee and his medical partner some paperwork called Adverse Event Report Forms. At a forum for area doctors and families, Van Zee brought in Yale University substance abuse experts to describe the sudden physical and psychological stress caused by dopesickness, outlining a hard truth that many Americans still fail to grasp: Opioid addiction is a lifelong and typically relapse-filled disease. Forty to 60 percent of addicted opioid users can achieve remission with medication-assisted treatment, according to 2017 statistics, but sustained remission can take as long as ten or more years. Meanwhile, about 4 percent of the opioid-addicted die annually of overdose.

When the researchers recommended that area doctors prescribe other, less abuse-prone drugs to patients with severe pain, a Purdue Pharma rep who’d been sitting incognito in the crowd rose to sharply challenge him. The problem was inadequate pain treatment, he insisted, not OxyContin’s abuse.

Sue Ella, Van Zee’s wife, worried that the patient load was getting her husband down. But, instead, she witnessed a burst of energy and something she’d never seen in her mild-mannered husband: righteous anger. By November, his letters took on a sharper tone as he described patients who drove the five-hour round-trip to Knoxville, Tennessee, for maintenance methadone—including a twenty-three-year-old woman who woke at 4 a.m. and made the drive to the clinic with her four-year-old daughter in the car.

Van Zee attended a nearby meeting of the Appalachian Pain Foundation, a Purdue-funded professional association whose job was to capitalize on the growing pain-management movement of the 1990s and to amplify its organizing principle—that pain remained vastly undertreated. The invitation

to the meeting featured a quote from a seventeenth-century English apothecary: “Among the remedies which it has pleased Almighty God to give man to relieve his suffering, none is so universal or efficacious as opium.”

Van Zee presented the company with two major requests: stop the aggressive marketing of OxyContin for the treatment of noncancer pain, and reformulate the drug to make it less prone to abuse. As an example, he touted the makers of the painkiller Talwin, who in a 1982 reformulation had added a narcotic blocker, or antagonist, called naloxone, to the mix—and immediately reduced the drug’s diversion and misuse.

In the fall of 2000, a newspaper story had run in nearby Tazewell County, Virginia, about an uptick in crime—between August 1999 and August 2000, 150 people had been charged with OxyContin-related felonies. In a county of just 44,000 people, there had been ten armed robberies of drugstores in the past eighteen months. Unemployed Tazewell miners like Doug Clark, who’d once made thirty-five dollars an hour, were now in legal trouble for ripping copper from an abandoned mining-equipment shop—to resell on the black market and fund his next OxyContin buy. Clark had gotten hooked after surgery to repair an injured neck and broken jaw; a rock had fallen on him inside a nearby Russell County mine, since closed.

Purdue’s medical director, Haddox, called the reporter, Theresa M. Clemons, to complain about her crime coverage, and he seemed intimidating.

Now, at the meeting that followed Clemons’s reporting, Haddox met with Van Zee, the county prosecutor, and other county officials, who told him about Oxy-related property crimes and check forgeries, and addicts who were doctor-shopping multiple physicians to feed their habit and to make a buck. Hypodermic needles were turning up at routine traffic stops.

While Purdue was concerned about the problem in the coalfields, Haddox said, he believed the worries were overblown. At the meeting, when Haddox and his colleagues steered the conversation toward the *underprescribing* of narcotics, prosecutor Dennis Lee was gobsmacked.

“We have never seen anything like this before,” Lee interrupted. “There’s just no comparison. Not just pill counting, but the human [tragedies].”

On the way out of the meeting, Van Zee pulled Haddox aside to reiterate his concerns about the promotional gimmicks the company was lavishing on doctors. The physician freebies needed to stop, Van Zee said.

“How is that any different from what every other drug company does?” Haddox fired back.

“People aren’t stealing from their families or breaking into their neighbors’ homes over blood-pressure pills,” Van Zee said.

Van Zee didn’t yet grasp what was truly driving the furious rate of overprescription. Sales-rep bonuses were growing exponentially, from \$1 million in 1996, the year OxyContin hit the market, to \$40 million in 2001. New patients were given OxyContin “starter coupons” for free prescriptions—redeemable for a thirty-day supply—and Purdue conducted more than forty national pain management and speaker-training conferences, luring doctors to resorts from Boca Raton, Florida, to Scottsdale, Arizona. The trips were free, including beach hats with the royal-blue OxyContin logo. More than five thousand doctors, nurses, and pharmacists attended the conferences during the drug’s first five years—all expenses paid.

“The doctors started prostituting themselves for a few free trips to Florida,” recalled lawyer Emmitt Yearly from nearby Abingdon, Virginia. As Van Zee delivered his message in meetings and letters, some desperate families hired Yearly to represent their loved ones for Oxy-related crimes. “The irony of it was, the victims were getting jail time instead of the people who caused it,” Yearly recalled.

He remembered a dislocated coal miner from Grundy, Virginia, confessing that OxyContin had become more important to him than his family, his church, and his children. “It became my god,” the man said.

By the end of 2000, Purdue had passed out fifteen thousand copies of an OxyContin video called “I Got My Life Back: Patients in Pain Tell Their Story,” without submitting it to the FDA for review, as required by the agency.

The video, available for checkout from doctors’ offices, lauded OxyContin’s effect on patients’ quality of life and minimized its risks. The doctor-narrator heralded the new term “pseudo addiction,” wherein opioid-

seeking patients “look like a drug addict because they’re pursuing pain relief...[when in reality] it’s relief-seeking behavior mistaken as drug addiction.” He then repeated Haddox’s favorite sound bite: that opioid analgesics caused addiction in less than 1 percent of patients.

The source of this claim was a one-paragraph letter to the editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine* written in 1980. The letter was never intended as a conclusion on the risks of long-term opiate use, one of the authors would much later explain, yet it was trotted out repeatedly during OxyContin’s first decade.

At Dine ’n’ Dash gatherings and in doctors’ offices from the coalfields to the California coast, this letter about an unrelated initiative was repeated and tweaked until its contents no longer resembled anything close to the authors’ intention, like an old-fashioned game of telephone gone terribly awry.

A year after starring in the Purdue Pharma video, that same doctor, South Carolina pain specialist Dr. Alan Spanos, gave a lecture insisting that patients with chronic noncancer pain should be trusted to decide for themselves how many painkillers they could take without overdosing—just as the morphine-dispensing doctors had said of wounded Civil War veterans a century before. He reasoned that the patients would simply “go to sleep” before they stopped breathing.

By March 2001, Van Zee was as fed up with letter writing as the alarmed Richmond doctor had been in 1884, precisely two decades before his peers took up the cause and three decades before the government began regulating the drugs: *I have heard them, with tears in their eyes, say that they wished it had never been prescribed for them.*

Van Zee’s neighbors were dying. The region had now buried forty-three people, dead of oxycodone overdose, since Purdue launched its drug. Addicted users had gone from snorting to routinely injecting the liquefied crushed-up powder with livestock syringes they bought (or stole) from local feed stores. At the Lee County jail, seventy-nine people were crammed into cells designed to hold thirty-four. “We were so overwhelmed, we were just stacking ’em on the floor,” the sheriff, Gary Parsons, told me; one of the

prisoners had bought four OxyContin tablets by trading away his family's mule.

While attempting to make a night deposit at the bank next door, the manager of Payless Supermarket in nearby Coeburn was gunned down by a masked robber trying to fund his next Oxy fix.

A half hour away in Clintwood, a man made the bold move of throwing a cement block through the front door of a pharmacy, even though it was across the street from the courthouse and the sheriff's department. "A deputy heard the alarm go off, and here's this guy running away and dropping pill bottles along the way, he's so high," Richard Stallard, the lieutenant, recalled.

In small towns where residents were used to leaving their doors unlocked, patrol officers were suddenly seeing people pushing stolen lawnmowers, four-wheelers, and even garden tillers down the street. "We called it 'spot and steal,'" recalled Rev. Clyde Hester, who joined Van Zee and Sue Ella in their Lee Coalition for Health, the grassroots group. "They'd look for things during the day—weed eaters were popular—and then at night they'd come back and pick them up," he said. To fuel his OxyContin habit, Hester's own son stole his gun, which the minister later retrieved from a local pawnshop.

A man in Dryden killed a young man attempting to break into his house to steal his wife's prescription drugs, which he'd spotted above the kitchen-sink windowsill—down the road from Van Zee's house. And as metal prices rose, Sheriff Parsons reported thieves stealing everything from copper cemetery vases to wires plucked from a telephone pole that addicted users had chopped down. Parsons even had his stepson arrested for stealing his own personal checks to buy black-market OxyContin. "There is literally not a family in this county that has not been impacted by this drug," he told me in 2017, a statement I heard in every Appalachian county I visited.

In early 2001, Van Zee and the Lee County Coalition for Health launched a petition drive asking the FDA to order a recall of the potent painkiller, via a website called recalloxycontinnow.org.

Drawing deeper lines in the sand between Van Zee and the industry, and also between him and most of his physician peers, the petition received more than ten thousand signatures, most from Lee County and the result of a standing-room-only town-hall forum he organized at the high school in

March 2001. “In a place where people barely have money for gas in their cars, by far this was the biggest crowd I’d ever seen gathered in Lee County,” one organizer told me. Eight hundred people attended, some sitting in the auditorium aisles. Roanoke-based U.S. attorney Bob Crouch called OxyContin “the crack of Southwest Virginia,” with Oxy overdose deaths now substantially surpassing those caused by cocaine and heroin.

The next month, the DEA developed a “national action plan” to monitor Purdue, asking the company to limit distribution of the drug, rethink its marketing strategy, and consider reformulating the drug to be abuse-resistant. This marked the first time in the agency’s history that it targeted a specific drug to be policed by its manufacturer to prevent diversion and abuse.

In response, the company announced a ten-point plan to curb abuse, including the distribution of tamper-resistant prescription pads, an educational program aimed at alerting teens to the dangers of prescription drugs, and a \$100,000 grant for the creation of a statewide prescription monitoring program, or PMP, to halt doctor-shopping. The company also stopped distributing its most potent form of OxyContin, the 160-milligram pill, and reduced shipments to Mexico in light of reports that the drug was being smuggled back into the United States—sometimes by people making the twenty-three-hour drive from Virginia’s coalfields to the Mexican border or flying with pills taped to their back.

With great fanfare in July 2001, the FDA announced it had worked with Purdue to put a black-box warning on the drug, the strongest type of prescription-drug caution. The goal was to help prevent inappropriate prescriptions, misuse, and diversion.

But a company spokesman downplayed the black box, calling it “more of an exercise in graphic design” and pointing out that legitimate users didn’t experience the high created by abusers who snorted or injected the drug. The real victims, executives said time and again, were their “legitimate patients,” who would be denied OxyContin if its distribution were restricted.

That year, a former Purdue rep remembered, the salesperson attended one of the company’s new seminars on diversion and abuse, meant to educate reps so they could inform authorities about suspected diversion. It was now possible for a rep who called on indiscriminate prescribers to earn

as much as \$100,000 a quarter in bonus pay alone, the rep told me. “It behooved them to have the pill mills writing high doses,” the rep added. “The [diversion/abuse] seminar was just a cover-their-ass type of thing.”

“Let’s be clear,” a Purdue Pharma spokesman said in August 2001, in a meeting with Virginia’s attorney general. “The issue is drug abuse, not the drug.” The product shouldn’t be blamed for deaths, because in many cases the victims were also drinking alcohol and taking other drugs.

Van Zee scoffed, telling a *Roanoke Times* reporter: “To me, that’s like somebody who was shot with a howitzer and a BB gun, and you walk up and say it’s a little hard to tell what killed him. Was it the howitzer that took off half his chest, or was it the BB gun?”

Another set of scales fell from the doctor’s eyes as a distinct possibility flashed before him: No one in federal government would take seriously the concerns of a country doctor until opioid abuse took hold in the cities and suburbs. “If it’s a bunch of poor folks up in the mountains, it doesn’t affect them personally,” he said.

Purdue had tried in vain to quiet the Appalachian naysayers a few months before, in March 2001, by offering Stallard and other county leaders a \$100,000 “grant” they could put toward drug treatment and law enforcement. The offer had come the day after a meeting Van Zee arranged between Purdue executives and concerned family members, including a prominent Pennington Gap banker, the one whose addicted son had already blown through \$80,000 of his life savings. If Purdue wouldn’t listen to local doctors and cops, Van Zee reasoned, maybe it would listen to someone whose son’s addiction had nearly depleted his 401(k).

“We are an average family,” the banker said in his appeal to the executives, showing them a picture of his son. The banker had grown up in the Monarch coal camp, putting himself through college one night-school class at a time. Before his son stole from the family to buy black-market OxyContin, he had been a good student and a burly outdoorsman. “Surely you have got enough patriotism to worry about this country?” the banker

said. He pointed out that the company must have known Lee County (population twenty-three thousand) had an OxyContin problem before Lee County did, considering that it was sending as many pills to the region as it was to areas five times the size. “I’m sorry your family is having such a problem,” Purdue’s chief executive officer, Michael Friedman, said.

At the meeting’s end, the executives stunned the group when they laid out an ad they planned to place in the local newspaper, a full-page “open letter” to the people of Lee County. In it, the company contended that Purdue had not targeted its marketing to areas like Appalachia with high disability or Medicaid rates, nor had the company known of the drug’s abuse potential. Purdue Pharma also disputed suggestions that it could quickly or easily reformulate the drug.

The parent meeting had been a setup. Whereas Van Zee thought the company might finally be willing to make some compromises—“Art... really thought Purdue would feel some empathy” toward the banker, Sue Ella recalled—it was plain now that was not the case. The meeting had been brokered to shove the ad down the group’s throat.

Sue Ella blew up, telling Haddox: “You have done more to hurt Appalachia than the coal industry has ever thought about doing.”

Haddox said he resented the implication, and Sue Ella said she didn’t give a damn if he did. “I said, ‘Look, I’m an Appalachian scholar, and my family goes back here forever, and I take tremendous insult,’” she recalled.

She stormed out with the others, and the newspaper ad never ran.

The next day Friedman gathered with Richard Stallard and other law enforcement officers at Kathy’s Country Kitchen in the Lee County seat. Sister Beth Davies, the pluckiest of the three nuns who had answered the War on Poverty call, was in attendance.

So was pharmacist Greg Stewart, a miner’s son whose parents had personally helped build the St. Charles clinic. When Stewart filled OxyContin prescriptions, he begged his customers to lock their medication up. He’d already been the victim of two robbery attempts, including one by the son of a neighboring hair-salon owner who crawled in through the ceiling vents connecting the salon to Stewart’s store.

When Purdue Pharma offered to put \$100,000 toward expanding the county's drug treatment and law enforcement efforts, Stewart said he was inclined to accept the donation as partial payback, considering the fortune the company was making off the area's misery. Van Zee and Sue Ella agreed, and even drafted a letter of acceptance after the meeting. Sue Ella explained that she was initially for accepting the money "because of my experience with the coal companies taking and taking and taking, and all the companies, they sit up north with their inherited wealth and leave nothing behind except broken bodies."

But Sister Beth, the five-foot-tall redheaded nun, was having none of it. The executives might be able to intimidate the people up north, where their philanthropy held sway in places like Harvard and Manhattan. But Beth was a formidable New Yorker herself, with a master's from Columbia. More important, she'd grown up under the tutelage of high-powered nuns who ran hospitals and colleges with a firm hand but a fair eye, and a mother who read a book every day.

A Staten Island native, Sister Beth had worked in Stamford, Connecticut, Purdue's hometown, where she ran a Catholic school before moving to Appalachia in 1971. A former student of hers from Connecticut had recently called to apologize, in fact; he was a reporter at the Stamford newspaper, which had been strongly encouraged not to write anything critical of the company, she said.

In 1996, the same year OxyContin was introduced, Sister Beth had stood up to a crowd of sixty coal miners and executives and their lawyers—all men—to demand the Lone Mountain coal company make reparations for the havoc caused by one of its faulty coal-slurry ponds. A liner had burst, sending wastewater screaming through the village of St. Charles. The water unloosed a boulder that rammed a resident's house, flooded other homes, scattered coal waste and litter for miles along the Powell River—endangering fish and mussel beds—and generally scared people half to death.

That event pitted company miners from other camps (forced to defend the company or lose their pay for the day) against local miners whose community had been devastated by the flood. Lone Mountain's defense, as articulated by one of the outsider miners: The town was already full of litter and "Pamper trees"; therefore, the flooding was simply another "act of

nature” unleashed on an already diaper-scarred landscape.

Health care administrator Tony Lawson remembered the way Sister Beth stood up in that meeting—“this tiny little thin woman who was so angry the paper she was holding with her statement shook in her hands. But she spoke loud and clear to all those men in that audience. She was absolutely the most fearless, bravest person I’ve ever seen.”

The executives glared, and the hired miners booed, but Sister Beth didn’t waver. Though the coal company eventually paid to clean up the mess—not nearly enough, in the nun’s opinion—the flood of slurry-pond waste was an ominous harbinger for St. Charles.

If the Purdue executives thought that people like Sue Ella and Sister Beth could be bought, they had not done their homework. Both had stood on the picket lines with strikers and their families for nine life-and-death months in 1989, when the Pittston Coal Company wanted such huge union-contract concessions as reduced pay-in to retired miners’ health insurance and wage cuts. Sister Beth had literally lain on the ground, to block the coal trucks, while Sue Ella stood next to the striking miners with her six-month-old baby in a carrier.

Over the years, Sue Ella’s and Sister Beth’s lives had been threatened because of their social activism, including once when Beth convinced an illiterate coal miner not to sign away all company liability for a mining accident. (“Greed makes people violent,” she told an interviewer in 1982. “When we stand with the least in the struggle for justice, there’s a price to pay.”)

The Purdue offer was just another page in an old story. This is what happens when wealthy people think they own you, Sister Beth told her Lee County friends. Since the first piece of coal was chiseled from the first mountainside rock by a large out-of-state corporation, the region had suffered from a pattern of exploitation, she said, ticking off all the mining-company executives who’d flown in over the years and spread their money around trying to buy peace, and then shut down unions, reduced black-lung benefits, and kept other industries out to maintain low labor costs.

Sister Beth thought about all the firsts she was starting to see at her Addiction Education Center in Pennington Gap, where she and Van Zee were now conferring daily over their mutual patients, among them young women now prostituting themselves for drug money. She thought about the

high school senior, a cheerleader, snorting OxyContin in the school library. About the people having their teeth pulled for the sole purpose of eliciting an Oxy prescription from a dentist. About the middle-aged woman who'd ruefully remarked in the middle of being fingerprinted and photographed that she was wearing the same gray sweatpants she'd had on the last time she was arrested for distributing OxyContin. "I'd burn those if I were you," a sheriff's deputy quipped.

But it wasn't funny to Sister Beth.

She recalled the first phone call she'd taken about the drug, in the late 1990s. The informant had told the cop. The cop called the pharmacist. The pharmacist called Sister Beth. It was another game of telephone, only this message remained tragically on point:

"Beth, you wait," pharmacist Stewart had told her on the phone. "They're saying it's nonaddictive, but you mark my words: This is the beginning of a disaster for us."

The disaster was now in full bloom. And Sue Ella and Sister Beth guessed exactly where it was headed. Even if Big Pharma and the pill-mill doctors could be brought to justice, the morphine molecule was so deadly, its lure so intractable, that those who were already addicted were likely to be ruled by it for the rest of their lives.

Sister Beth threatened to quit the coalition if anyone accepted Purdue Pharma's \$100,000 grant, and Van Zee's letter of acceptance was never sent. The grant was nothing more than "blood money," she said, and the coalition agreed.



Poff Federal Building, Roanoke, Virginia

Chapter Three

Message Board Memorial

While regional reporters from Boston and Roanoke were unpacking the damage done in their rural outposts, the story of the burgeoning OxyContin epidemic didn't hit the national media until February 9, 2001, when *New*

York Times reporter Barry Meier and a colleague swooped in just north of Lee County for a front-page story on Operation OxyFest, a nine-month federal investigation that had produced the biggest drug-abuse raid in Kentucky history. “We caught 207” user-dealers, a federal prosecutor told Meier. Most of those arrested were patients who had coaxed pills out of doctors who were either busy, slipshod, or quietly cooperative in overprescribing the drug. “We didn’t catch half of them; that’s how pervasive this thing is.”

That summer, it became clear that OxyContin abuse had seeped out of the western Virginia and Maine backwoods, creeping up and down the Appalachian range. The news was disseminating, finally, not just to big cities on the East Coast but also into the Deep South and parts of the Southwest. Overdose deaths and OxyContin-fueled crime grabbed headlines from Miami–Dade County to Bridgeport, Connecticut. Across the country, OxyContin was becoming a staple of suburban teenage “pharm parties,” or “pharming,” as the practice of passing random pills around in hats was known (ironically in farming communities).

It would fall, ultimately, to the parents of the dead to organize the first national response, specifically to a thirty-nine-year-old IT worker named Ed Bisch. In February 2001 Bisch had been summoned home to his working-class enclave of Philadelphia after taking a frantic call from his daughter, who’d just found her eighteen-year-old brother passed out and turning blue in the bathroom.

Bisch arrived home to find a pair of emergency workers sitting on his front lawn. His son, Eddie, was a high school senior, a soccer player with decent grades and plans to attend a local culinary school. Eddie had complained of feeling ill recently, but it had not crossed his father’s mind that he was deep into opioid withdrawal. Bisch had suspected Eddie was drinking and maybe smoking pot but hadn’t considered pills. They had plans to fly to Florida for a father-son fishing vacation in just six days.

“I’m sorry,” one of paramedics told Bisch. Eddie was dead.

As friends gathered, Bisch was still in shock and grappling for answers when he asked the first responders what his son had taken.

“Oxy,” one said.

“What the hell’s an Oxy?” Bisch wanted to know.

The first time Ed Bisch heard the word “OxyContin,” his son was dead

from it.

If parents were slow to catch on to the epidemic, experts weren't any quicker. The movement of OxyContin from the economically straitened hinterlands to the largely more affluent cities and suburbs in the early aughts reminded historian David Courtwright of the iatrogenic wave of opium and morphine addiction that stormed the nation exactly a century before. By the 1920s and 1930s, most of the small-town morphine addicts and Civil War veterans with soldier's disease had died out, not long after the national crackdown hastened by the Harrison Narcotics Act, which set the scene for drug prohibition and, later, the so-called War on Drugs.

"After the old-time addicts died out, narcotics were unheard of throughout the mid-twentieth century, unless you got cancer," Courtwright said.

For most of the previous century, opioid addiction was mainly relegated to big northeastern cities, where heroin had long been smuggled in through illicit channels, infiltrating the Harlem jazz scene of the 1940s and the beatnik subculture of the 1950s. The term "hipster," in fact, drew from the Chinese opium smoker of the 1800s, who'd spent much of his time smoking while reclining on one hip. The hipster counterculture took inspiration from heroin-addicted jazz greats like Charlie Parker and John Coltrane.

But where prescribed painkillers were concerned, the Harrison Act had effectively contained the earlier iatrogenic wave of addiction, and the small-town female morphine addict gave way to the image of the hustling, mainlining male junkie. Progressive doctors championed the carefully restricted use of narcotics and called out heavy prescribers for being behind the times. Pharmacists, too, upped the refill bar so high that in 1955 the heroin-addicted Beat writer and artist William Burroughs called them "sour, puritanical shits," unlikely to fill even a codeine prescription without checking with the doctor's office first.

When 20 percent of American soldiers came back from Vietnam with symptoms of heroin dependence, researchers were initially puzzled by the fact that most didn't go on to become heroin addicts—possibly, some theorized, because they returned to spread-out social networks in rural areas

and small towns where heroin didn't exist. It may have helped, too, that many were detoxed in Vietnam before they came home, with the veterans who continued to struggle with addiction typically being the ones who already had drug problems before serving.

"In the early 1990s, probably ninety percent of the heroin market was still in cities like New York, Chicago, and Detroit," Courtwright explained. "There was this long-standing urban hierarchy of heroin that completely dominated the illicit opioid market in the United States." But when doctors started widely prescribing OxyContin for noncancer pain in the late 1990s, it effectively nationalized the supply, making opioids no longer only a big-city story. "So that any doctor in any small town, under the dispensation of a new FDA-approved prescription, could now suddenly provide opioids to people with low back issues and so on. You read a lot about economic depression and loss of morale, and I'm certain that fuels the epidemic.

"But the supply expansion [via OxyContin] came before anything else. And if it hadn't been for the supply expansion, then this [epidemic] would not have happened," Courtwright said.

If history was any indication, the moment OxyContin and other opioid pills became too expensive or too cumbersome to get, illegal drug peddlers would step in to fulfill the market demand, just as they had done a century earlier when heroin became illegal. For centuries, dealers of opium, morphine, and heroin understood that an addicted person's fear of running out—of becoming dopesick—portended one hell of a business model.

The author of several books on the history of drug addiction, Courtwright said he used to tell his students that "what most surprised me in my lifetime were things like the internet, or seeing tattoos on respectable women. But I've got to add this to the list of real shockers. I'm sixty-four years old, and I have to admit, I didn't think I would ever see another massive wave of iatrogenic opiate addiction in my lifetime."

Courtwright wasn't the only one. Though it took nearly a decade before police, the press, and drug-abuse experts fully understood what was happening, Ed Bisch watched the urbanization of the pill epidemic play out on his front lawn in 2001, as paramedics carried his son's body away.

He retreated to his computer, where he was shocked to learn that his son's death had been the region's thirtieth opioid overdose in *the past three months*.

How was that possible when he'd only just learned the word? "The internet was still new, and back then it was mostly message boards as opposed to websites," he said.

Bisch channeled his grief into computer code. Hoping to warn other families, he created his own message board, giving it the bluntest moniker he could think of—OxyKills.com. Within weeks it had morphed into a scrolling database of grief, warnings, and statistics. The website became a clearinghouse for the latest Oxy-related overdose numbers reported by local medical examiners and the DEA. Bisch promoted news stories about OxyContin, such as when the *New York Times* noted that the drug's sales in 2001 hit \$1 billion, outselling even Viagra.

Parents from Florida to California joined Bisch in memorializing their dead children on his site, which became a running tally of dead athletes and young mothers and former beauty queens, many no more than twenty years old. "I was answering every email, and it was consuming me," Bisch recalled. "Probably ten deaths a day, sometimes a hundred emails a week."

Lee Nuss of Palm Coast, Florida, was too grief-stricken to reach out to Bisch initially, but her daughter, Monique, called him one night, begging him to talk to her mom. Turned out they had grown up in the same section of Philly, in the same working-class neighborhood of Fishtown, less than a mile apart. And the similarities didn't end there.

Nuss, too, had lost an eighteen-year-old son, Randy, who died of a single, crushed-up 80-milligram Oxy bought from a friend whose mother wanted him to sell it to pay their rent. "I had no idea he was using pills until this happened," Nuss said. She told herself that Randy hadn't been using long, because she still had opioid pills prescribed to her in the wake of dental surgery that were untouched at the time of his death.

The Fishtowners made an informal alliance with Van Zee and Sister Beth after reading Barry Meier's 2003 book, *Pain Killer*. If OxyContin nationalized the opioid supply chain, Nuss and Bisch nationalized the opposition to it, launching a grassroots nonprofit called Relatives Against Purdue Pharma (RAPP). It was Ed Bisch's message board sprung to life, a nonvirtual resistance party that would play out politically and in person

over the next decade.

Together the parents-turned-activists would lobby for the creation of statewide prescription monitoring programs, or PMPs, so doctors could check a patient's prescription records and prevent themselves from being shopped. Members would sponsor drug-prevention workshops in schools and hold signs outside Purdue's corporate headquarters featuring poster-sized pictures of their dead kids. They would battle—online and at times in person—with chronic-pain patients who praised the drug for allowing them to function and to sleep through the night. Bisch suspected (correctly, in a few cases) that some were “paid advocates,” hired by Purdue to troll his website and post contrary views.

From court cases to medical seminars, RAPP could be counted on to turn up whenever and wherever Purdue was in the news. In 2003, its members traveled from Rhode Island and New Jersey to rally outside a drug-abuse-prevention conference held in Orlando at the Caribe Royale resort—because Purdue was an exhibitor at the conference. The protesters were already battling the rain when Bisch began reading aloud the names of 260 people memorialized on his website—only to have an unidentified woman turn a sprinkler on them. (A hotel executive denied having anything to do with soaking the parents.)

A Purdue Pharma spokesman at the event told an *Orlando Sentinel* reporter: “We offer our sincere condolences to anyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one from a drug overdose” but insisted that Purdue's marketing of OxyContin had been “appropriate.”

Raised Catholic and deeply religious, Lee Nuss began wearing a pair of rosary beads for protection at such events. As an added talisman, she carried a tiny bronze urn in which she'd tucked a portion of her son's remains. (As she explained it to me: “I leave the main urn at home on my mantel. But when I leave the house, I like to have Randy right there with me.”)

The memorials kept flooding the message board. When Barbara Van Rooyan's twenty-four-year-old son, Patrick, died in 2004—after ingesting his first and only OxyContin, at a Fourth of July party—she reached out to Bisch, who put her in touch with Van Zee. “At the time, I knew very little about the drug, other than Rush Limbaugh had been addicted to it,” she told me.

Van Rooyan, who lived in Folsom, California, had also read about Van Zee's battle with Purdue in *Pain Killer*, and she had one central question for the country doctor: "How the hell had such a strong drug come on the market to begin with?"

Van Zee walked her through the FDA's 1995 approval of the drug, led by its top examiner, Curtis Wright. Van Zee just happened to have a copy of the company's New Drug Application, or NDA, a document trove that had been a Christmas gift from Sue Ella in 2000. "It was all I wanted that year," Van Zee told me. Sue Ella admired the way her mild-mannered husband was stifling his hardwired passivity to stand up for the region, yet she increasingly resented the time it took away from their family life. "We used to try to go a day without saying the words 'addiction' or 'OxyContin,' but we never made it, not once," she said.

Though Purdue claimed it had no idea of the drug's abuse problems until February 2000, Wright had signed off on a 1995-filed NDA review that spelled out how crushing the tablets would lead to immediate, rather than controlled, release of the drug; that withdrawal symptoms had been witnessed in several patients during clinical trials; and that 68 percent of the oxycodone was in fact recoverable from one single, crushed-up pill when liquefied and injected.

In a summary of his approval, Wright had even urged caution in the product's marketing materials: "Care should be taken to limit competitive promotion." In fact, minimal care had been taken in the drug's promotion. Wright would go on to work as a consultant for Purdue Pharma two years later.

Van Zee told Van Rooyan, too, about the eight-hour drive to Maryland he'd made in January 2002 to testify before an FDA advisory committee convened to discuss the agency's role in approving and overseeing the management of narcotics. That meeting pitted Van Zee, wearing his only suit and a Jerry Garcia necktie his mother had given him, against Purdue executives and some of the nation's top pain-management experts, most of them acknowledging that they were or had been paid speakers for Purdue.

Van Zee found himself outnumbered nineteen to one, a harrowing experience for a loner not accustomed to public speaking.

"I get nervous," he told me. "It was intimidating, especially in front of my peers, all of whom had big reputations in the field. But this was my

responsibility to do, and I did feel like I was speaking truth to power.”

“He practiced and practiced and practiced,” added Sue Ella, who accompanied him on the trip. “I tend to be emotional when I speak, but Art is so careful about saying only what he absolutely knows to be true. His ego is never invested.”

The gist of Van Zee’s opposition, as outlined by one Purdue-funded speaker: “We are allowing the abuse and the ignorance of the few to affect the potential health for the many....Remember the biggest form of drug abuse today is under treatment, and this is a crime that we can all eradicate.”

The next morning, in a ten-minute conversation with the country’s elder statesman of pain management, Dr. Russell Portenoy, Van Zee asked Portenoy to describe what he believed to be an acceptable level of addiction risk from OxyContin. Given that the “less than 1 percent” figure, trotted out repeatedly from the 1980 medical-journal letter, was out of date and applied only to a hospital setting—rather than in the context of chronic pain treated at home—Van Zee asked Portenoy: Hadn’t that been a meaningless calculator of long-term risk?

He showed Portenoy an OxyContin distribution map, highlighting the overlap between heightened crime and drug abuse in regions like Lee County, where OxyContin was prescribed at a rate 300 to 600 percent above the national average.

“That’s good,” Portenoy responded. The more opioids that were out there, the better to meet the needs of chronic-pain patients.

But what if the risk of addiction is 5 or 6 percent? Van Zee persisted. “What do you consider acceptable collateral damage? If you create fifty thousand patients that are opioid addicts?”

The country doctor’s single-mindedness exasperated Portenoy, who walked away.

Although a decade later Portenoy conceded to *Wall Street Journal* reporters that he and other pain doctors had mistakenly overstated the benefits of opioids while discounting their risks, back then Van Zee was the doctor whose judgment was questioned and even mocked. “A lot of people discounted Art as a rabble-rouser and a kook,” a prominent Virginia health care administrator explained. Another parent activist suggested that Van Zee’s uncomfortable and slightly disheveled appearance helped Purdue cast

him as a kook rather than the groundbreaking physician he was. “He should’ve gotten the Nobel Peace Prize,” she said.

Van Zee pressed on, raising similar concerns at the end of the 2002 hearing with the FDA committee’s chairman, Dr. Nathaniel Katz. He told Katz he’d spent months looking for studies that addressed the long-term-abuse risks to patients who used painkillers.

“There’s a reason you didn’t find any,” Katz, also a prominent pain doctor, explained. “They don’t exist.”

This time it was Van Zee’s turn to walk away. It dawned on him then that the only detailed study about potential abuse was the one that Purdue itself had undertaken in 1995 for its NDA—the one he’d read about in the gift from his wife. The one that noted that 68 percent of the drug could be extracted from a crushed tablet.

The FDA forum ended with experts urging the agency to closely monitor abuse and addiction as soon as new drugs went to market. But for Van Rooyan’s son Patrick, the efforts were way too little, way too late. A year before his death, the FDA had missed another opportunity to help her son when it chose not to restrict the use of OxyContin to severe pain, a move that might have reduced addiction without compromising terminally ill or dying patients’ access to the drug. Van Rooyan was never against the use of OxyContin for terminal pain but argued that it should not be used for chronic, noncancer pain unless all other treatments have first been explored. “To this day, I believe OxyContin has a place for terminal, end-of-life care, and for acute pain when other, lesser opioids haven’t worked,” she told me. But it was clear as early as 2004 to Van Rooyan, then a researcher, professor, and college counselor, that the FDA failed to protect the public, her son included, not only when it approved the drug but also multiple times thereafter.

It would not come to light for nine more years that FDA regulators and Big Pharma executives had been quietly holding private meetings at expensive hotels at least annually since 2002, through a drug-industry-funded nonprofit, an ethical quandary a *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reporter shone the light on in 2013. The meetings led to the development of “enriched enrollment,” an aptly named practice that allowed drug companies to weed out people from their studies who didn’t respond well to their drugs, therefore tipping the balance toward FDA approval of new

drugs—and away from science.

“Pay-for-play is just not the way the FDA operates,” an FDA regulatory official claimed when the investigation broke. “That’s not part of the culture of the FDA.”

The same *Journal Sentinel* reporter, John Fauber, would also uncover how the American Pain Society and the American Academy of Pain Medicine pushed for expanded use of opioids for long-term chronic pain while taking in millions from the companies that made them. His articles prompted a 2012 Senate investigation, led by Senators Chuck Grassley and Max Baucus, that targeted both the American Pain Foundation and Purdue, among other nonprofits and pharmaceutical companies.

But the results of that investigation would end up sealed in the Senate Finance Committee’s office, where they remain buried, despite periodic calls for their disclosure.

“A lot of us were very happy when they started the investigation, but nothing’s come of it; it was never followed up on,” said Dr. Steve Gelfand, a South Carolina addiction specialist and activist who helped Van Rooyan file a recall petition with the FDA.

“To me, it’s all been just another political power play,” he said.

Staffers at the FDA got used to hearing the name Barbara Van Rooyan. (“We all know who you are,” an ombudsman told her.) She was burning up their phone lines, demanding a temporary recall of OxyContin until it could be reformulated in abuse-resistant form and relabeled for severe pain only. “The FDA’s recall form is long and involved, designed to make you not want to do it,” Van Rooyan remembered. A similar FDA petition to force Purdue to put stronger warning labels on OxyContin, detailing the risks of frequent prescribing, had been filed by the Connecticut attorney general in 2004—and was stalled in bureaucratic purgatory. (That initial application would be rejected four years later, in 2008.)

“But I’m a stubborn Dutchwoman with my degree from Berkeley, and I was used to doing research.” And the words of the friend who’d given Patrick the OxyContin pill haunted her as she typed: “It’s kind of like a muscle relaxant, and it’s FDA-approved, so it’s safe,” he had told him.

If Van Zee's decade-long quest had begun to feel quixotic—now in his sixties, he wondered how much longer he could keep up the pace of thirteen-hour workdays, much of them spent treating addicted patients—Van Rooyan's focus was a balm. Whereas Van Zee's earlier recall petition with its ten thousand signatures was never formally submitted to the FDA —“we simply didn't have the time, energy, staff to do that,” he said—Van Rooyan was unfazed by the paperwork, happily folding Van Zee's data into hers with her physician husband's help and filing it on February 1, 2005.

She testified alongside Van Zee at FDA hearings and organized a protest in her Northern California hometown outside a Purdue-funded continuing medical-education seminar taught by a well-known pain-clinic doctor.

She waited for an answer on her FDA recall petition. And she waited.

Following in her artist son's footsteps, she painted portraits of herself holding Patrick shortly after his birth, then another of his brother, Andrew, as she saw him in his grief at his brother's death: raw and naked, curled up in a fetal ball.

“I had a feeling that things would get a lot worse before they got better,” she told me. “I knew that I might not see change in my lifetime, but I was going ahead with this battle anyway.”

If the federal regulators weren't moved by memorials to dead Americans from their grieving mothers and fathers, maybe the country doctor and the nun and their growing team of mourning parents would finally get justice from the courts. At minimum, they hoped to amplify Purdue Pharma's negative press and raise awareness about the heroinlike drug.

Among RAPP's first courtroom targets was the 2003 civil lawsuit against Purdue brought by former Florida Purdue sales rep Karen White. She'd been fired in 2002 for allegedly having paperwork irregularities, poor communication skills, and declining sales, the company said. But White claimed in her legal filing that she was actually fired for refusing to sell to doctors who were illegally overprescribing OxyContin to their patients.

In the winter of 2003, the company bragged in a press release about all the civil suits it had won against people blaming their addictions on OxyContin under a headline that read like a football blowout: “65–0.”

“These dismissals strengthen our resolve to defend these cases vigorously and to the hilt,” said general counsel Howard Udell. “We have not settled one of these cases—not one. Personal injury lawyers who bring them in the hopes of a quick payday will continue to be disappointed.”

But the firm’s legal bills were mounting—to the tune of \$3 million a month—and Purdue still had 285 lawsuits pending against it, including another whistle-blower suit, filed by Marek Zakrzewski, an assistant research director who described raising safety concerns with seventeen different higher-ups about the “serious negative implications” of the drug, according to his complaint. His bosses banned him from undertaking additional research into the problems and even from informing the company’s regulatory department about his concerns, his suit claimed. Fired in May 2003 after complaining to the FDA, Zakrzewski eventually dropped his lawsuit, citing illness, the following year. He’d had a heart attack from the stress of working at Purdue Pharma and was fired while on medical leave, according to his filing. A Purdue spokesman countered that the researcher dropped the suit after the firm refused to settle the case, calling the allegations “baseless.”

To help burnish its image in the face of so many legal, financial, and public-relations problems, Purdue hired former New York mayor and Republican insider Rudy Giuliani and his consulting firm, Giuliani Partners. Just a few months after his lauded response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Giuliani’s job was to convince “public officials they could trust Purdue because they could trust him,” as Barry Meier and another writer at the *New York Times* put it.

The DEA was already investigating lax security standards at the company’s manufacturing plants following the 2001 arrest of two Purdue employees accused of trying to steal thousands of pills. Giuliani brokered a behind-the-scenes negotiation of the fine paid by the Purdue affiliate that ran its New Jersey pill factory, including the condition that the firm pay a \$2 million civil penalty—without admitting any wrongdoing. The DEA’s diversion control manager, tasked with making sure drugs are lawfully used and not diverted into illicit trafficking, was left fuming; she had argued for a \$10 million fine. She was sure Giuliani and company executives had gone over her head to her boss in an attempt to gain “access and insights into how to manage things politically.” At a luncheon, Giuliani had helped raise

\$20,000 for a new DEA Museum historical exhibit.

Facing a growing number of lawsuits and investigations, Purdue Pharma heaped praise on its American hero and new political star: “We believe that government officials are more comfortable knowing that Giuliani is advising Purdue Pharma,” Udell gushed in a promotional brochure. “It is clear to us, and we hope it is clear to the government, that Giuliani would not take an assignment with a company that he felt was acting in an improper way.”

After all, not only was Giuliani old pals with the DEA director, but he also had just been named *Time* magazine’s Person of the Year 2001.

The terrorist attacks had elevated Giuliani’s stature, but in a boon moment for his future employer, they also temporarily diverted media attention from OxyContin. A sales executive said as much to Purdue employees on September 12, via voicemail, giving them the day off. The message the sales manager left, according to a former Purdue staffer: At least the tragedy for the nation would take OxyContin off the front pages of the nation’s newspapers.

The RAPP parents believed White’s wrongful-termination case would prove that Purdue’s marketing practices had crossed a legal line. “We had such high hopes that she would be one of our saviors,” Van Rooyan said.

Ed Bisch drove twelve hours from Philadelphia in 2005 so he could sit in a Tampa federal courtroom beside Lee Nuss at Karen White’s civil trial, the first case against Purdue to progress beyond summary judgment. White was asking the jury to award her \$138,000 in lost wages plus \$690,000 for emotional pain. Depressed and anxious since her dismissal, she had never before been fired from a job.

“They were counting on us to run out of steam,” Bisch recalled. “They were all lawyered up and Rudy Giuliani’d up.” He counted ten lawyers on Purdue’s side, not including staff, quarterbacked by the formidable Atlanta-based firm of King and Spalding, whose clients ranged from cigarette makers to Coca-Cola. White’s lone attorney estimated Purdue spent \$500,000 defending the case, an amount a Purdue spokesman declined to confirm.

White was tall and trim, a thirty-six-year-old brunet based in Lakeland, Florida. She'd been a champion of the drug's painkilling properties early on, having witnessed her mother's painful, premature death from cancer.

White argued that she was wrongly fired for refusing to participate in aggressive marketing of OxyContin that, in her opinion, several times crossed the line into breaking the law. White's attorney named two specific doctors she was urged to call on who were widely known for overprescribing. Both eventually lost their medical licenses for shoddy prescribing, including one who'd handed out prescription drugs in exchange for sex.

At the time, prescription drug abuse had become so rampant in White's Florida sales territory that one opioid-addicted Orange County veterinarian had recently been caught using the names of several pet owners' dogs—including Brutus, Cha Cha, and Lady—to forge more than a thousand OxyContin prescriptions.

White had a single lawyer and no staff, not unless you counted Bisch, Lee Nuss, and Nuss's late son, Randy, who was tucked inside her mini urn. Nuss also brought her rosary beads, loaning an extra set to White to hold during the proceedings.

A few days into the trial, Nuss realized she'd accidentally left the beads behind in her car. Excusing herself to retrieve them, she handed White her son's urn to hold during her absence at the plaintiff's table.

"Really?" White said, tearing up, as Nuss recalled it. "You would let me do that?"

When Nuss returned with the beads, she was surprised to see White coming out of the courtroom so soon. A recess had already been called. "Where's Ed?" she asked.

He had to leave the building, White told her, adding, "Lee, please, don't get upset."

"Why?" Nuss wanted to know.

"You're not gonna believe this, but Ed had to take your son out of the courthouse."

Purdue's lawyers had heard about the urn and asked the judge to have it

removed from the building.

Bisch and White expected the grieving mom to blow up, but Nuss surprised them by laughing instead. She told her friends, “My son is not here in body, but he is definitely here in spirit.

“He might have left the building, but he *will* be back!”

Bisch was due back at work in Philly before the jury’s decision came in—but he was not surprised when Nuss called with the verdict. “Ed, there’s just too much money involved,” she told him. “We really thought we were doing something, only to find out, nobody is gonna do anything.”

The jury ruled in favor of Purdue, whose lawyer called the case a “personal disagreement with promoting the drug in an entirely legal way.” While White believed calling on sleazy pill prescribers was illegal, her lawyer had not proved the illegality of the company’s sales strategies.

“The court basically said, ‘Don’t tell us what you believe. Tell us what you know,’” explained University of Kentucky legal scholar Richard Ausness, who has written about the difficulty of winning civil cases against Purdue, citing among other reasons the company’s hefty defense chest. At the request of a Purdue lawyer, the government’s highly critical 2003 Government Accountability Office study of Purdue’s marketing practices was ruled inadmissible in court.

During the first decade of the drug’s existence, the legal system could not prove the makers of OxyContin had broken the law.

Back in western Virginia, a young U.S. attorney with political aspirations was secretly working on his own attempt to defeat Purdue in court as early as 2003. John L. Brownlee was brash, a little bit of a cowboy, and as a former paratrooper and Army Reserve JAG Corps captain, the thirty-six-year-old was not afraid of high-stakes drama.

Or the press. He was married to a local news anchor, Lee Ann Necessary, whom he’d met on the job a decade earlier. With a ruddy complexion and a mop of reddish-brown hair, he had a boyish appearance that belied his hard-charging demeanor. If *Law & Order* sold action figures, they would look

like John Brownlee, down to the crisp creases in his trousers and his American-flag lapel pin.

Brownlee became so fond of calling press conferences that he traveled with a portable podium with fold-out legs. His prosecuting philosophy: If you're not losing sometimes, you're not going after the hard cases. By the time Karen White's case was dismissed, in 2003, Brownlee was still smarting over his own trial loss, via an acquittal, hung jury, and dismissal, in a multiple wrongful-death suit against Roanoke pain specialist Dr. Cecil Knox, whose office had been raided by federal agents, storm trooper-style. Knox and several of his office workers had been handcuffed and carted away—one of the women was carrying her groceries out of a store—even though defense attorneys had already arranged with federal authorities for their clients to turn themselves in. The showboating earned Brownlee a reputation as aggressive and, at times, overreaching.

On the heels of the Knox case and another high-profile case that generated equally fierce public criticism and ended similarly—with two hung juries—Brownlee needed a big legal win.

With plans to seek elected office—Brownlee would run for Virginia attorney general in 2008—he may have viewed prosecuting Purdue Pharma as “a vehicle for being in the national news,” recalled Laurence Hammack, a longtime *Roanoke Times* reporter (and my former colleague) who chronicled OxyContin's spread.

“Yes, he had self-serving motivations. But on the other hand, [OxyContin abuse] was happening everywhere in the country, and no one else took them on.”

Brownlee did, almost immediately after being appointed U.S. attorney, though he didn't go public with the investigation until 2005. He had read Meier's *Pain Killer* and knew about Purdue's attempt to bully the journalist after its publication.

Purdue lawyer Howard Udell complained to Meier's *New York Times* editors, claiming that Meier had a conflict of interest in the story. His book, Purdue argued, gave him a financial stake in the newspaper's continued coverage of OxyContin. Udell wanted Meier taken off the beat.

“Their agenda was to shut me down, and to suppress as much news coverage of the company as possible,” Meier recalled. “And he [the paper’s public editor, Daniel Okrent] bit on it, not realizing that what they weren’t telling him was that they were already under criminal investigation,” which Meier suspected. (With two minor exceptions, Meier would not write about Purdue Pharma for the newspaper again for four years.)

Meier may have been temporarily silenced from writing about the company, but nothing prevented John Brownlee from poring over the footnotes of his book. Brownlee also relied on an eager fraud investigator in his office, Gregg Wood, to communicate with Van Zee and the RAPP parents. Since the epidemic’s earliest days—long before Google Alerts—Wood had been sending out regular compilations of OxyContin-related news articles and overdose statistics via email to law enforcement agents, prosecutors, and other interested parties. Recipients who spotted any OxyContin news in their localities should “let me know,” Wood urged at the top of every update, which Van Zee nicknamed the Wood Reports.

“Never assume I already know!” Wood enthused.

“Gregg Wood was very high energy,” Van Zee recalled. “He would get up in the middle of the night checking for stories.”

As health fraud investigator for the U.S. attorney’s office in Roanoke, Wood was tasked with picking through the weeds of the civil cases against Purdue, most filed by small-town lawyers who were trying in vain to challenge the company for overpromoting the drug while ignoring its risks for addiction. Their clients ranged from miners and masonry workers who became addicted following work-related injuries to a factory worker so desperate to stop taking OxyContin that he’d flushed his pills down the toilet, telling his lawyer that trying to explain dopesickness to a nonaddict was “like describing an elephant to a blind man.” The lawyers, the parents, Van Zee, and Sister Beth—all were happy to pass along every piece of dirt they’d collected on Purdue, from sales-rep call notes and depositions to Van Zee’s Christmas gift from Sue Ella—the NDA.

“The Purdue lawyers were totally underestimating the work done by Wood,” recalled Abingdon lawyer Emmitt Yearly, who lost his own civil

case against the company. Arnold Fayne McCauley, seventy-one when his suit was filed in 2004, had spent decades stooped over and crawling through thirty-six-inch-high Lee County coal seams. In coal-mining parlance, he worked “low coal,” the most strenuous of the coal-extracting jobs. “Now that’s working hard, working in low coal,” Van Zee said, pointing to a picture in one of his exam rooms of a miner crawling on his knees, in the dark, under a sagging mass of mountain. “Compared to that, all I do is move around a mouse.”

When he wasn’t working low coal, Fayne McCauley spent nights and weekends hauling and spreading lime from his truck for area farmers. Asked to describe the defining characteristic of her father, Lisa Nina McCauley Green said simply: “All I remember about him growing up is, he worked.” As the Virginia writer John C. Tucker described it in *May God Have Mercy*: “For a miner who avoids being crippled, burned or buried alive, the usual question is which will give out first—his lungs, his back, or his knees.”

In McCauley’s case, it happened to be his shoulder, from a late-1990s injury caused by the snapping of an underground cable that slammed into his shoulder and back. Building his product-liability case against Purdue, Yeary collected some twenty boxes of documents arguing that Purdue overpromoted the prescription painkiller while ignoring its risks—rendering people like McCauley addicts while reaping billions in sales.

Yeary had gotten the idea for the lawsuit in 2000 after hearing Van Zee give a community college lecture on OxyContin. Yeary hadn’t been particularly interested in the topic but went along to satisfy a schoolteacher he was dating at the time. As Van Zee went through his slides—ranging from overdose deaths to spikes in Oxy-related crime committed by addicted users, all of it meticulously sourced and footnoted—Yeary leaned over to a lawyer friend sitting on his other side and said, “*Damn*, they’re putting the wrong people in jail!”

He remembered thinking Van Zee was not the “kind of guy you raised hell with in college.” It occurred then to him that the country doctor was the perfect conduit for helping him identify plaintiffs to sue Purdue. In fact it was Van Zee who eventually connected Yeary to McCauley, a patient Van Zee was by then treating for OxyContin addiction.

But like most of the civil plaintiffs suing Purdue, Fayne McCauley was

an imperfect client, because he admitted under oath that he had taken multiple drugs, gradually supplementing his original OxyContin prescriptions with OxyContin he'd bought on the streets. When his original doctor, Richard C. Norton, tried to wean him from the drug, cutting him back from 40 to 20 milligrams, it had made McCauley extremely nervous, crippling him with diarrhea, sweats, and a skin-crawling feeling he called gooseflesh. McCauley bought the black-market OxyContin, he told an opposing lawyer from Purdue in a series of depositions, for the same reason a century's worth of heroin addicts had kept returning to their dealers for more dope: to stave off dopesickness.

It didn't matter that the septuagenarian hadn't been stealing from his granddaughter before OxyContin came along, or cashing out his relatives' life-insurance policies, or borrowing guns for protection from his new pill-peddling associates. It didn't matter that he'd been treated with lower-strength opioids after losing two fingers to a 1980 coal-mining accident but did not develop a \$300-a-day drug habit until 1999, shortly after his first bottle of OxyContin.

Nor did it matter that people like Van Zee had urged Dr. Norton not to fall for the Purdue reps' spiel about "the great epidemic of untreated severe pain." Van Zee had seen Norton's clinic in nearby Duffield, with its parking lot full of out-of-state cars, and confronted him about it at a hospital meeting. ("I said, 'You know, Rich, people are injecting this.' And he was astounded," Van Zee recalled.)

In 2000, Norton was sentenced to five years in federal prison, not for overprescribing OxyContin but for his role in an unrelated hospital corruption scheme. According to sales-rep notes subpoenaed in the McCauley case, federal prosecutors were also investigating Norton for operating a pill mill but opted to front-burner the wider and more urgent corruption case.

Stallard, the Big Stone Gap drug detective, remembered an informant unpacking the life of a Norton patient: "He told us, 'Dr. Norton wrote prescriptions for Lortab, forty-milligram OxyContin, and eighty-milligram Oxys all in the same visit.'" When Stallard subpoenaed the physician's records, he saw Norton had prescribed thousands of OxyContin pills in just thirty days.

Stallard turned the information over to Brownlee's assistant prosecutors,

who said physician cases were difficult to prove, since there was always another paid physician expert willing to testify that such prescription dosages were necessary. Nonetheless, the prosecutors brought in DEA agents to help target the most egregious prescribers, and local detectives started feeding them information, Stallard said.

“We sent all kinds of information in to the feds but we never got anything back out of them. They told us nothing,” he added, of Brownlee and his assistant prosecutors. “We started calling them the Shadow Company.”

The federal investigation actually began when the Shadow Company realized Norton was simply following his Purdue rep’s guidelines to a T, Stallard said.

But none of that counted in the civil cases against Purdue, wherein plaintiffs had to prove that a specific injury was directly tied to company wrongdoing with such specificity that a reasonable jury could assign the wrongdoing a dollar amount. Federal judge James P. Jones dismissed the McCauley case on the grounds that a jury would not have been able to divine whether OxyContin alone had caused the coal miner’s suffering.

Though other judges across the country simply dismissed the OxyContin lawsuits, Jones took the unusual step of inserting a personal opinion into his ruling: “Does the relief afforded by high-dosage opioids to those with severe, life-altering pain outweigh the risks of harm from addiction?” he wrote. McCauley’s case did not answer that question, he said.

A God-fearing Baptist, Fayne McCauley had loved country music and the Atlanta Braves. Everyone in the town of Jonesville knew him because he had refereed home basketball games at Lee High School for many years. His family had sent him to rehab seven times, before and after the case. “Every time he’d come back and lie to us and say he’s not taking the pills anymore when we knew he was,” his daughter, Lisa Green, told me. McCauley ended up selling family heirlooms at a flea market. He stole credit cards to buy a four-wheeler that he sold for money to buy drugs. “He would say my mom was trying to kill him when my mom doesn’t have a mean bone in her body,” Green added. “That drug took over his brain.”

Two years before her father's death, Green would drive to her parents' home to rescue her mom, bringing her back to Texas to live with her. Together they waited, cringing every time the phone rang late at night. Around dawn on October 22, 2009, it finally did.

When McCauley, seventy-five, died four years after his case was tried, police found him in his lime-hauling truck at 4 a.m. in the middle of a pasture—he'd crashed through a fence. Several near-empty bottles of pills, prescribed just two days earlier, were strewn on the seat next to him. A state trooper told McCauley's daughter and wife that he died of a heart attack, but his daughter believes he was murdered over a bad drug deal.

His head was blown apart, she said, as if from a gun.

The boxes of juicy sales-rep call notes and depositions that represented Fayne McCauley's case files did not molder in Yeary's law office attic. They were folded into Wood and Brownlee's trove of ammo for their case against Purdue. By the time Yeary lost the case, Brownlee's office was in the process of secretly logging millions of records on spreadsheets. The Wood Reports were coming out at a rate of four or five a week, and one employee was assigned to do nothing but catalog documents for the investigation—all of them buttressing Brownlee's belief that Purdue had knowingly concealed the drug's addictiveness.

When a *New York Post* reporter broke the news in 2005 that a federal grand jury was investigating Purdue, Van Rooyan told Bisch and the other RAPP parents, "They think they're going to run roughshod over a bunch of hillbilly lawyers." She recalled how Udell had gloated over the scores of legal wins against people like McCauley, and his pledge that the company would never settle such "absurd lawsuits."

But the company and its executives underestimated the U.S. attorney from Roanoke, who brought in prosecutors from neighboring jurisdictions and deputized them as special assistants to pick up the non-Purdue-case slack. To lead the Purdue investigation, he appointed assistant U.S. attorneys Randy Ramseyer and Rick Mountcastle, career government lawyers who were not given to drama and worked three hours west of Brownlee in the district's satellite office in Abingdon, closer to the

coalfields.

It would never occur to either of them to tote around a podium—or to voluntarily talk to the press. When I interviewed Ramseyer almost a decade later, he deflected questions with a combination of press paranoia and aw-shucks humility: “Sometimes people get intimidated by big companies and high-dollar lawyers. You just have to avoid that.” And: “It’s not rocket science; it’s just hard work.”

But Ramseyer and Mountcastle had watched their caseloads shift dramatically since OxyContin’s introduction. And they were well aware that the few federal prosecutors who’d earlier tried to bring Purdue to account for rising Oxy-related crime had fallen short, with only a handful of exceptions. Jay McCloskey, the U.S. attorney in Maine, had challenged the company’s promotional techniques early on, with some success. He had pushed the company to drop the doctor junkets and the 160-milligram version of its pill, only to leave his post in 2001 to work as a consultant for—wait for it—Purdue Pharma.

But the Abingdon prosecutors were content doing government work. Ramseyer and Mountcastle had sent a host of pill-mill doctors to jail over the years—one of whom had been doling out prescriptions from the back seat of his car. Since OxyContin’s introduction, the tiny Abingdon office had successfully prosecuted ten doctors, pharmacists, and dentists for overprescribing the drugs, including to nine-year-old kids. By the time their investigation was over, nine state and federal agencies would spend five years helping the stone-faced prosecutors build the case. Unlike the civil lawsuits that preceded them, Brownlee’s team had to prove only that the company had “misbranded” the drug, a broad and somewhat technical charge that makes it a crime to mislabel a drug or fraudulently promote it, or market it for an unapproved use. The federal prosecutors didn’t have to prove the misbranding was actually responsible for the overdoses and the addiction and misuse, just that Purdue Pharma had criminally misbranded the drug, according to Hammack, the *Roanoke Times* courts reporter. “So it was a very murky legal line, but Randy and Rick figured it out. But there was definitely this feeling by Purdue that this was a little bit of a backwoods, small-town outfit. I think they underestimated them to some degree,” Hammack said.

The four-year run-up to what would eventually result in the company's plea agreement involved Purdue Pharma struggling to *understand* that the backwoods lawyers had in fact sussed out a crime inside their mound of documents. The company put a full-court press on Brownlee, first with multiple phone calls from Rudy Giuliani, who attempted to unnerve the much younger man during settlement negotiations on Purdue's behalf.

Brownlee had read Giuliani's book, *Leadership*, to get ready for his first meeting with him. "I wanted to be prepared," he said. "Look, my view of the case was, it didn't matter where we were or how small we were. To me, it demonstrated that a couple of good, smart prosecutors, working out of a strip mall in Abingdon, Virginia, if they work hard and they're tenacious, they can win one of the biggest cases in Virginia," he told me.

An assistant prosecutor in the case recalled that Giuliani put on a folksy front but was not intimately involved in the negotiation's details, possibly because he was pursuing what would prove to be a failed bid for the Republican presidential nomination. "His role was that his star power alone was supposed to intimidate us," said an assistant federal prosecutor involved in the negotiations who was not authorized to speak publicly about the case. "People say 'the government and all its resources,' but when you're in the middle of a case like this, you don't feel that sense because they always have way more people working on the case than you have."

In the fall of 2006, Purdue's lawyers began to sense that this case against them was different; that a full-court press meant nothing when the opposing counsel was the United States of America. Was it really possible the small-town lawyers had compiled enough evidence to indict both the company and its top executives on a host of felony charges, not just for misbranding the drug but also for mail fraud, wire fraud, and money laundering? It seemed so, according to a memo written by the federal prosecutors to Brownlee at the time.

"But it got watered down, as it went through the Department of Justice headquarters, and the folks working for Purdue, including Giuliani, lobbied hard for the executives not to be indicted on felony charges," said an

observer connected to the case. The fines would get batted around, too, with Purdue initially offering to pay \$10 million compared with the government's initial proposal of \$1 billion.

The winnowing down of a settlement is a common part of plea agreements. Prosecutors typically threaten more serious charges while defense lawyers counter that they'll go to trial to prove their client's innocence. Meanwhile, Giuliani's lobbying efforts arrived with the timing and authority of a flagrant foul. In 2005, Purdue lawyers called then-deputy attorney general James Comey to question Brownlee's investigatory tactics, and Comey called Brownlee with concerns. The young attorney responded by personally driving to Washington to lay out his strategies.

"Brownlee, you are fine. Go back to Virginia and do your case," Comey told him.

But Purdue's boldest move came later, in October 2006, the night before the plea agreement was set to expire—after which the company would face charges—when a senior Justice Department officer phoned Brownlee at home (at a Purdue lawyer's request), urging him to extend the deadline to give Purdue more time. Brownlee was through being pressured. The lobbying and negotiations had gone on long enough. The clock had all but run out.

Rather than risk more serious charges or a jury trial in western Virginia, where the drug's problems were by now legend, the company accepted the plea agreement later that night. But Purdue wasn't quite finished negotiating. Eight days after it accepted the deal, Brownlee was stunned to see his name on a firing list, along with four other U.S. attorneys. Though he wasn't ultimately fired, the incident provided fresh criticism of then-attorney general Alberto Gonzales, accused of trying to sway the work of U.S. attorneys' offices.

And it only underscored the long reach of Purdue: Udell's defense lawyer Mary Jo White, a former Manhattan U.S. attorney, had been the one to press for more time in a call to a Department of Justice official. (Brownlee would break down how Purdue's attempted influence peddling worked—or didn't—in a later Senate hearing about the case.)

Brownlee weathered the heat. By the time the negotiations were complete, a Purdue-owned holding company, Purdue Frederick, would plead guilty to a single misbranding felony and the company's executives to

misdemeanor charges of misbranding the drug. In a bit of legal-language parsing, the executives would not stipulate that they'd had direct knowledge of the misbranding, only that "the court may accept these facts in support of their guilty pleas." In other words, their only crime was that they headed up a firm wherein *other* people committed crimes.

Compared with the charges Ramseyer and Mountcastle had originally threatened, the final agreement was a mixed bag. Prosecutors initially wanted to impose the \$1 billion corporate fine as well as multiple felony charges against both the company and the executives. "But we got what we could get," said a prosecutor involved in the case.

Purdue, for its part, had initially proposed paying \$10 million and incurring no felony charges—"an insult," according to a government source involved in the negotiations. "It was clear they thought we'd take a very small sum of money and go away—because it would be a lot of money for a district of our size," the source said. "I will tell you, what we ended up with was far closer to where we started than where they started.

"Their lawyers were shocked," the negotiator added. "They did not expect the firmness with which we approached this....Had they not agreed, we were fully prepared to take them to trial." The Sacklers, anyway, were convinced. Midway through the negotiations, following a Washington meeting of both sides, word filtered down from the Sackler family: "We can't buy our way out of this one. Make this case go away," the government negotiator recalled. If that meant throwing three executives under the bus, well, then, the men had been loyal employees for many years. But the Sacklers had to do what the Sacklers had to do.

The Sacklers understood that a federal jury convened in southwest Virginia, a region that had now seen as many as two hundred OxyContin-related deaths, could have awarded far harsher penalties. "We weren't just trying to get a little bit of money from them. The goal was to stop the criminal behavior, punish it, and to strip them of their profits," the negotiator said.

On a clear day in May 2007, in the atrium of a downtown Roanoke office building, Brownlee unveiled the news of the settlement: The company and its top executives would plead guilty to their role in a marketing blitz that hyped OxyContin's strengths while downplaying its propensity for addiction and abuse. To resolve the federal criminal and civil misbranding charges, Purdue would pay \$600 million in fines and admit that for six years it had fraudulently marketed OxyContin as being less prone to abuse and having fewer narcotic side effects than instant-release versions of the drug—a felony misbranding charge. Top executives Paul Goldenheim, Michael Friedman, and Udell would pony up \$34.5 million (or, rather, the firm would, on their behalf) and plead guilty to misdemeanor versions of the crime. The fines against Purdue and its executives accounted for about 90 percent of the company's profits from the time the drug went on the market, in 1996, until 2001, when Purdue dropped the insert language about the timed-lapse mechanism's ability to "reduce the abuse liability of a drug," Brownlee explained. It was the eleventh-largest fine paid by a pharmaceutical firm in the Justice Department's history.

Best of all for people like Bisch, Van Rooyan, and Nuss: An Abingdon sentencing hearing was planned for mid-July that would bring the Connecticut executives face-to-face with grieving parents, who were invited to discuss—on record, in court—the damage OxyContin had wrought. The executives would not serve any jail time, per the plea agreement, though it was ultimately up to the judge, at their court appearance, to sign off on the deal and outline the exact terms of their probation and community service.

Brownlee enjoyed presenting his evidence at the press conference, unfolding his podium against a staggering backdrop of documents amassed by Gregg Wood, the stoic prosecutors Randy Ramseyer and Rick Mountcastle, and scores of others recruited to the team—all of whom stood to his right. To his left sat an assortment of evidence culled from the two thousand cardboard containers they'd filled with documents, depositions, and data. The boxes were lined up in columns four to five feet high.

For added visual effect, Brownlee displayed falsified charts created by Purdue that had claimed "smooth and sustained blood levels" and "fewer peaks and valleys" for patients on OxyContin. The ginned-up graphs were meant to buttress the drugmaker's claim that OxyContin had less potential for abuse. An adjacent easel featured actual clinical data that the

prosecutors had culled from Purdue's own studies. The real data looked like a map of steep mountains, the faked data like a single gentle slope.

The fluctuations measured, in hours and milligrams, the difference between truth and lies. These charts represented two of forty-six assertions in a "statement of facts" drawn up by Brownlee's team and agreed to by Purdue, underscoring that the company had knowingly falsified several claims about the drug. Among them were numerous instances of Purdue quashing data critical of the drug, such as early reports of patients complaining of withdrawal symptoms ("I would not write it up at this point," one supervisor advised an employee, saying it might "add to the negative press"). Another fact highlighted the claim sales reps made to some doctors that oxycodone was harder to extract from OxyContin for IV use than other pain medications—when Purdue's own study showed that a drug abuser could recover 68 percent of the drug from a single pill. Likewise, the company conceded that some reps falsely claimed OxyContin caused less euphoria and was less likely to be diverted than Percocet and other immediate-release opioids and could therefore be used to "weed out" addicts and drug seekers.

It had all come from the Shadow Company's "Warehouse," as the prosecutors called it. The hillbilly lawyers had filled so many boxes with evidence that Brownlee had to rent extra space in an Abingdon strip mall to hold them all.



*The Pennington Pharmacy, Pennington Gap,
Virginia*

Chapter Four

“The Corporation Feels No Pain”

Abington is the legal and artistic hub of far southwest Virginia, a quaint town full of restored colonial-era brick buildings. By the time Purdue executives turned up there to be sentenced in 2007, it was better known for

upscale boutiques, arts, and crafts than for its twentieth-century role as a way station for coal trains hauling the prosperity out of places like St. Charles, some eighty miles west. That summer, the novelist Barbara Kingsolver was about to launch a trendy farm-to-table restaurant, the Harvest Table, in nearby Meadowview, an outgrowth of her memoir, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, then on the bestseller list.

Abingdon had nurtured the early acting talents of Ernest Borgnine and Gregory Peck in its storied Barter Theatre, named for Depression-era theatergoers' practice of trading a live chicken for the privilege of watching a play. Just a few months before the Purdue sentencing, in the spring of 2007, the Barter stage featured a homegrown comedy about the widow of a moonshiner who, fallen on destitute times, goes into the business of selling OxyContin, supplying her enterprise with stolen pills and those from her own prescribed stash.

When Sister Beth Davies saw the play, she alternately cried at the ruined lives, marveled at the Appalachian resourcefulness, and laughed at the snappy dialogue. "If you don't laugh sometimes, you'll go crazy," she said.

For a town with a population of just eight thousand, Abingdon had also nurtured a surplus of lawyers over the years, who were able to walk from their historic homes to both the federal and the state courthouse, passing statues of Confederate soldiers and historical Daniel Boone markers along the way.

The lawyers and coal-mine operators who lived here were more accustomed to fine dining and theater than rallies or protests. But in a steady rain that fell over the small mountain town, families who'd lost relatives to OxyContin converged on July 20, 2007, to speak their piece and to watch Udell, Friedman, and Goldenheim squirm in their federal courthouse seats.

Barbara Van Rooyan had flown in from her home in California. She wore the same blue floral sundress and white sandals that she'd worn to her son's celebration of life and carried a sign she'd made that read ONE PILL KILLS.

Sister Beth Davies had driven in from Pennington Gap and marched, in her raincoat, with a sign of her own. It featured a picture of Ed Bisch's

ruddy-cheeked son, Eddie, in his prom tux.

Van Zee had an out-of-state family commitment (his octogenarian father's birthday) and couldn't make it to Abingdon. But he left behind detailed notes for Sister Beth about everything from the sound system for the rally to bottled water for participants, plus talking points for follow-up letters to the editor.

He and Sue Ella were now attending funerals weekly, many of them his former patients', sometimes at a rate of two a day. He had even written a poem about one, titled "OxyContin," published in *Annals of Internal Medicine*:

It might have been easier
If OxyContin swallowed the mountains,
and took
The promises of tens of thousands
of young lives
Slowly, like ever-encroaching kudzu.
Instead,
It engulfed us,
Gently as napalm
Would a school-yard.

Mama said
As hard as it was to bury Papa
after the top fell
in the mine up Caney Creek,
it was harder yet
to find Sis that morning
cold and blue,
with a needle stuck up her arm.

Top of her class,
with nothing but promise ahead
until hi-jacked by
the torment of needle and spoon.

Ed Bisch and Lee Nuss had driven up together from her home in Florida, recycling the same signs they'd carried to the Orlando protest, only a little rumbled from the Caribe Royale sprinkler assault.

It fell to Bisch to lead the parade of fifty grieving relatives from a small park to the courthouse. His sign read OXY KILL\$ in big block letters.

Nuss, a tiny redhead, was dwarfed by a larger-than-life photograph of her son, Randy, handsome and olive-skinned. It matched the giant magnet she'd plastered on her car—at the suggestion of her grief counselor—meant to warn other families wherever she drove: IN LOVE AND MEMORY OF RANDALL NUSS AND OTHERS.

More than a decade later, as journalists and policy makers tried to pinpoint where and how the opioid crisis began, images from the rainy rally in Abingdon would get recycled in news accounts, the prescient parents marching with their signs, and next to them Sister Beth standing defiant, a look on her face that projected equal parts anger for what had happened and worry for what was coming next.

The Purdue executives had flown in on a private jet from Connecticut the night before for the sentencing hearing, staying at the elegant, historic Martha Washington Inn, conveniently located next to the courthouse. To avoid the protesters, their attorneys had asked the judge for permission to enter the two-story courthouse by a back door.

But Judge James Jones, a straight shooter with a booming voice, had watched his docket be overtaken by OxyContin-related crime.

No, Judge Jones ordered, the executives would enter through the front door of the courthouse just like everyone else.

Barry Meier stood off to the side, taking it all in. He'd been to Abingdon once before, in May, when Udell, Goldenheim, and Friedman made their first visit, to deliver their guilty pleas. Meier wanted to witness that occasion so badly that he'd arrived the night before, staying in a motel on the outskirts of Abingdon. And he wanted his appearance to be a surprise. He and a freelance photographer the *New York Times* hired from Roanoke would hide out near the front of the hotel, ducked between parked cars,

staking out the executives.

Meier had interviewed the men many times before in their corporate offices and on the phone, but he wanted to witness their Appalachian reckoning firsthand.

It was his fifty-eighth birthday, and the veteran journalist could not have been happier with his gift.

“Everything I’d written was now justified,” he told me.

As he and the photographer stood up, Udell, Goldenheim, and Friedman seemed stunned to see them, Meier recalled. Goldenheim, the scientist, stared steely-eyed toward the camera while Udell and Friedman glanced quickly away.

In a rally before the sentencing hearing, the parents took turns reading the names of the dead. Bisch had printed them out from his message board memorials, now so numerous that the document was more than fifty pages long. Their voices broke periodically as they choked out the names.

Bobby Lee Ashcraft Jr., aged nineteen

Paul Aboata, twenty-two

Heather Marie Goslinowski, fifteen

Nicole Notaro, nineteen

They got through only ten pages before the hearing began.

In a photograph that ran in the next day’s *New York Times*, two moms in matching rain scarves held each other, one clutching a poster of her seventeen-year-old daughter: IN LOVING MEMORY OF SARAH NICOLE. HER LIFE WAS A LIFE WORTH LIVING. Behind them stood Van Rooyan in her sundress—blue, for her son’s favorite color—holding her prepared remarks.

Before the day was over, the executives would hear themselves described as corporate drug lords and marketing tricksters, on a par with Colombian cartels and P. T. Barnum. They would be asked to imagine themselves in the shoes of a parent of a college junior: “What if it was your son or daughter you saw in the morgue when we went there, and he was autopsied, sliced and diced?”

The executives would have their integrity questioned and their futures threatened. “I will reach out to any organization that Mr. Friedman speaks to about having a member of his family survive the Holocaust, and contact that group and say to them that Friedman is no better than Adolf Hitler, who killed and destroyed countless lives; Hitler through death and torture, Friedman through death and addiction,” said Marianne Skolek, who lost her twenty-nine-year-old daughter, Jill. Skolek brought along her grandson, Brian, who was six years old when his mother died of an overdose of prescribed OxyContin in 2002.

“Brian is here in the courtroom with me today because he needed to see that bad things do happen to bad people,” Skolek said.

But not bad enough, the parents told the judge. The plea agreement called for no jail time, and many beseeched Judge Jones to reconsider incarceration for the three.

“I think jail is too good for you guys,” said Lynn Locascio from Palm Harbor, Florida. Her son was still struggling with addiction, having been prescribed OxyContin after surgery resulting from a car accident. “I think you should go spend some time in a rehab facility like my son did and watch that. Maybe you’ll change your minds.”

Lawyers for the executives argued that the shame of criminal charges was punishment enough. They reiterated, over and over, that the men—the top corporate executives who had directed the company’s legal, financial, and pharmaceutical divisions—had personally done nothing wrong. Representing Udell, attorney Mary Jo White called the company’s head lawyer “the moral compass of the company,” pointing out that Purdue, at Udell’s urging, had voluntarily taken the 160-milligram pill off the market after safety concerns became known. Udell had championed prescription monitoring programs when most others in the industry were opposed, and he was behind the suspension of shipments of OxyContin to Mexico when it became clear Americans were traveling there to bring back the drug.

Calling the case “a personal tragedy for Mr. Udell,” White said most people would wrongly equate the strict liability misdemeanor he pleaded guilty to with criminal wrongdoing. Jail time, she added, “would

unjustifiably and needlessly compound the stigma and punishment for an offense and facts that are without personal wrongdoing.”

Likewise, Goldenheim, the firm’s former chief scientist and medical director, was in “agony” about the charge, his lawyer said. He’d been labeled “a criminal, and that is horrendously harsh punishment for someone who has done so much good, and under the agreed statement of facts has done nothing wrong.”

Friedman’s lawyer pointed out that the company distributed antidiversion brochures and antifraud prescription pads; created a law enforcement liaison unit within Purdue; funded local law enforcement programs; and, eventually, altered sales-representative compensation so the system would not lend itself to abuse. While other Purdue employees “made statements about OxyContin that were inconsistent with company policy and that should not have been made...Michael Friedman did not participate in that misconduct.” Without proof that he committed a criminal act, to jail him would be virtually unprecedented under American law, his lawyer said.

In other words, the lawyers did exactly what Ramseyer predicted they would do in his remarks: They refused to take responsibility for the death and destruction caused by the drug—to the point of reiterating, again in court, that “the enormous benefits of OxyContin far outweigh its risks, even taking into account the grief from those we’ve heard about today.”

Calling it “unprecedented” to hold pharmaceutical corporate officers criminally liable in such a case, Ramseyer noted that Udell, Friedman, and Goldenheim, in accepting the plea, were conceding that they had not been “powerless to prevent the crime. As corporate officers, these men had a duty to ensure that misbranding did not occur.” He predicted that Purdue’s next public-relations campaign would begin the moment he sat down from making his remarks: “They will attempt to minimize the crimes to which they pled guilty.”

And while that is exactly what their lawyers did, Ramseyer later said the men seemed distressed throughout the proceedings. “They were very unhappy,” he told me. “We do cases in court where people get sentenced to twenty or thirty years in prison, and they didn’t seem as unhappy as those three guys.”

Ramseyer remained loath to say much more about the case, although the

fact that he'd been diagnosed with cancer while working on it—and had to take a break midway through the case for treatment—seemed to sear it in his mind as both a personal challenge and a professional high mark. He hoped the case had a chilling effect on pharmaceutical companies and overprescribing doctors alike, but he wasn't sure. He'd read recently that enough opioid painkillers had been prescribed in 2010 to medicate every American adult around the clock for a month. "And it's worse now," he told me in 2016.

The problem was so widespread that Super Bowl ads now targeted relievers of opioid-caused constipation. "Purdue had a laxative they marketed, too," Ramseyer said, of Senokot. In fact, according to the rep-call notes subpoenaed for the case, OxyContin and Senokot were routinely recommended hand in hand. "So they got you on both ends!" Ramseyer said.

Conspicuously absent from the courthouse drama was the family that owned the company and its 214 affiliates worldwide—and benefited the most from the drug's sale. Purdue had earned over \$2.8 billion from the drug by 2007, including \$595 million in earnings in 2006 alone. Unlike a public company that answers to shareholders, privately held Purdue answered only to the Sacklers.

In 2015, the family would earn its way onto *Forbes's* "America's Richest Families" list. With an estimated net worth of \$14 billion, the OxyContin clan would edge out such storied families as the Busches, Mellons, and Rockefellers. Having gone from selling earwax remover and laxatives to the most lucrative drug in the world, the family had museum wings and college institutes named for it from Boston to Tel Aviv.

Mortimer Sackler even had a pink climbing rose named after him, courtesy of his gardener wife. The official description of this flower, the Rosa Mortimer Sackler, reminded her of her husband, she said: "The blooms give the impression of delicacy and softness but are, in fact, very tough and little affected by bad weather."

Mortimer may have inherited his toughness from his older brother, Arthur, who'd put himself and his two brothers through medical school by

selling student newspaper ads and delivering flowers, sometimes with holes in his shoes.

The Don Draper of American pharmaceutical marketing, Arthur pioneered the idea of showering doctors with favors and funding experts to back drugmakers' claims in the 1960s. It was his marketing genius that fueled the emergence of pills as a quick fix, his marketing prowess that delivered Valium and Librium, dubbed Mother's Little Helper by the Rolling Stones, to countless nightstands.

Realizing the importance of controlling his company's message, Arthur had launched both a medical advertising agency and a medical newsmagazine before buying Purdue Frederick with his brothers. It was under his direction that preliminary and inevitably flawed scientific studies were first used to buttress the wonders of whatever drug he was hawking; no wonder his brothers thought nothing of excavating the flimsy and outdated letter heralding the "less than 1 percent" addiction rate nearly a decade after Arthur's death.

What in fact was the addiction rate among those prescribed opioids for chronic nonmalignant pain? More recent studies—not letters to the editor penned in 1980—put the figure as high as 56 percent. At the time of his death, in 1987, Arthur was lionized for his entrepreneurial vision and boundless obsession for collecting things. Especially art. He once talked the Met into letting him reimburse the museum for four major works that the museum already owned just so he could have them displayed with his name as the donor.

Still, he had not been fully embraced by the Upper East Side society to which he aspired—not until his memorial service, held at the storied Temple of Dendur, inside the Met's Sackler Wing, at which New York mayor Ed Koch remarked: "I don't know why, but Jews aren't buried in synagogues. Well, Arthur built his own temple."

Arthur Sackler hated not just bad press but *any* press that was not of his own directing, a *Vanity Fair* writer observed shortly after his death. As obsessive about secrecy as he was about moneymaking and art, he would have abhorred everything about the Abingdon hearing.

At the courthouse, testifying before the judge, the relatives of the dead argued repeatedly for jail time. As did Public Citizen, a consumer advocacy group that vented: “Why have three wealthy Purdue executives, who have pleaded guilty to orchestrating this dangerous promotional campaign, escaped jail time, and why are they paying merely \$34.5 million in penalties?” Even a fellow prosecutor in Brownlee’s office felt Purdue’s punishment was too light: “The dividends may go slightly down, but nobody cares because nobody who made the product goes to jail. If the government were serious, they’d put people in jail, and [others would be] fearful,” said Assistant U.S. Attorney Andrew Bassford, who would spend most of the next decade prosecuting heroin dealers as a direct consequence of the OxyContin epidemic, down the hall from the office where Brownlee worked. “But you can’t put a corporation in jail; you just take their money, and it’s not really their money anyway.

“The corporation feels no pain.”

Van Zee and Sister Beth viewed the settlement with both satisfaction and regret. Though the executives were placed on probation for three years and ordered to perform four hundred hours of community service in a drug abuse or drug treatment program, Van Zee and Sister Beth were furious that the Purdue fine would not be allocated to provide drug treatment in the medically underserved region. “This little county was left with nothing, even though we’ve been disproportionately impacted” by the drug, Sister Beth said.

The \$634.5 million fine was instead divided among law enforcement, state, and federal Medicaid programs (to reimburse it for claims resulting from the misbranding); to create Virginia’s Prescription Monitoring Program; and to settle \$130 million in civil claims.

The only thing the Lee County sheriff’s office got from Purdue was placebo OxyContin pills for use in drug stings.

Many anti-opioid activists were mad, too, that technically it was Purdue Frederick, Purdue Pharma’s holding company, that was banned from participating in the federal insurance programs Medicaid, Medicare, and Tricare as part of its five-year probation—rather than Purdue Pharma itself, which was still permitted to participate, and therefore to continue selling OxyContin. (“They are independent, associated companies,” a spokesman explained.) The executives were likewise banned from doing business with

federal health programs, a decision they repeatedly appealed in intervening years and lost, leading one federal district judge to scold: “Plaintiffs appear to misunderstand or misstate the basic elements of their conviction.”

“It’s very typical for these companies to have an entity that is a shell company, basically, set up to plead guilty to the crime, rather than the actual corporate entity taking the fall,” Meier said.

Flanked by state and federal flags, Judge Jones admitted that the lack of jail time frustrated him. But the Abingdon federal judge’s hands were tied by the plea agreement struck between Purdue and the prosecutors, he said. He would have preferred that parts of the fine be funneled into treatment, adding that prosecutors were reluctant to “direct treatment funds in a manner beyond their expertise and possibly contrary to national policy.”

Asked nearly a decade later about the aftermath of the Purdue Pharma settlement on the communities his court covers, Judge Jones told me: “Opioid addiction continues to be, frankly, a terrible concern....It’s rare that I don’t have a case today involving substance abuse.”

He declined to divulge the details of the executives’ probation, citing privacy concerns, other than to say they completed it, to his satisfaction, in their home state of Connecticut.

When Howard Udell died unexpectedly of a stroke, in 2013, at the age of seventy-two, a local newspaper heralded him for having turned his community service into a redemptive experience. After counseling veterans at a Veterans Administration hospital on job skills, Udell went on to found the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center, helping hundreds of veterans navigate problems including evictions, dishonorable discharges, and substance-abuse-related crimes. Even after his community service hours were completed, Udell stayed on to assist the legal center. “It was very unpleasant for Howard, who was scrupulously honest and careful, but we endeavored to make the most out of it,” said Friedman, who also performed his community service at the site, according to the newspaper, which described the executives’ initial service there, euphemistically, as “volunteer.”

A lesser person would have crawled into the basement, said Udell’s son,

Jeffrey, himself a former federal prosecutor. His dad's fingerprinting at the guilty plea, his three years of supervised release, the fact that Udell had to check in with his probation officer before he visited his grandchildren across state lines—the younger Udell was still incensed that his late father had been forced to endure such indignities. He pointed out repeatedly in an hour-long phone call that the government presented zero proof of his father's wrongdoing.

“The idea that someone of his caliber and his integrity could have the ignominy of a federal crime is so outrageous and unjust,” said Jeffrey Udell, describing his dad as a humanitarian and a law-and-order saint, the kind of restaurant patron who would correct a waiter when presented with a mistakenly small bill.

“I know there are unfortunately some very sad and unfortunate people who are parents of kids who abused drugs and overdosed. I feel horrible for those people, as my father did, and for the loss they've suffered.”

But again, he insisted, Team Brownlee presented no evidence that Howard Udell had any knowledge of what was happening in the company “some twenty-five levels below him amid a [sales] hierarchy that was not remotely within his purview.”

Jones said the case was not only the largest he'd ever presided over, in terms of the fine, but also the most dramatic. There was a hard rain that day, he recalled, and yet there were so many people in attendance that the court set up a separate overflow room for observers to watch via video.

Nor would he ever forget the most heart-wrenching portion of the parent testimony—that of Fishtown native Lee Nuss, who described how her only son, Randy, died as he was getting ready to leave for culinary school in 2003. “His prepaid college ended up paying for his funeral,” Nuss said.

Nuss had begged the judge to reject the terms of the plea agreement, imploring him, “Money means nothing to them. Let the punishment fit the crime.”

Then she brandished the tiny brass urn she carried whenever she traveled, the one Purdue lawyers had gotten ejected from Karen White's whistle-blower trial. Randy had begun as dust, in her belief, and unto dust

he had prematurely returned. She clutched his ashes as she stepped down from the stand.

“This is from your drug, OxyContin, and here he is in this courtroom,” Nuss said, staring steely-eyed at Udell, Friedman, and Goldenheim.

A reporter sitting in the courtroom thought for a moment she was going to throw the urn at the men. But Nuss waved it instead and returned to her seat.

She had wanted the men to apologize, to admit that they had understood all along that OxyContin wasn't a novel way of fighting pain but simply a different and more potent way of dispensing nature's oldest drug.

If the Sacklers' lieutenants had legitimately not known about the flood of pills unleashed by sales reps toting around bad data and free shrunken twenty-five rungs down the corporate ladder from them, maybe it was because they had not cared to look.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Two

Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear



Hidden Valley, Roanoke County, Virginia

OceanofPDF.com



Strasburg High School, Strasburg, Virginia

Chapter Five

Suburban Sprawl

Awareness of the opioid crisis has typically come in waves, often celebrity-studded and well covered by the media: the death by overdose of

Philip Seymour Hoffman, in 2014, then two years later the death of Prince. But for ordinary citizens, the news that opioids had crossed over from *Not me and not anyone I know* to mainstream traveled more slowly, in dribs and drabs, maybe when the *Cincinnati Enquirer* became the first newspaper in the country to dedicate a reporter solely to the heroin beat.

Four hours east of Lee County, in a southern city that counts the local TV weathermen among its biggest celebrities, the February 2006 news that meteorologists Jamey Singleton and Marc Lamarre had been shooting up heroin stunned viewers of the NBC affiliate station in Roanoke, where I live. The story broke after Lamarre suffered a near-fatal overdose at a party, an event that drew local police and, eventually, the attention of federal authorities.

Viewers loved watching them both, especially the stylish, tanned Lamarre, poised and confident, his hands gesturing fluidly in front of the weather map's green screen. Back then, it was still hard to picture a thirty-six-year-old collapsed on an apartment floor in an affluent Roanoke suburb, harder still to imagine a world where educated, well-paid white guys felt the need to disappear into bathrooms at parties or, worse, as in Lamarre's case, end up being tossed into a bathtub and doused with cold water and ice in the hope of waking him up.

"The weathermen were skin popping," recalled police chief Chris Perkins, then an undercover Roanoke detective. The term referred to the practice of injecting the heroin under the skin, rather than directly into a vein, for a milder high—the idea being that skin popping gave you a better high than snorting heroin but wasn't as potent or dangerous as intravenously injecting it.

But the weathermen were soon outed, as most users are, the sweat circles under the guys' sport coats the first in a progressively sad series of giveaways.

"They'd been running around in eighty-degree weather in long sleeves," Perkins said. "Young people were already starting to snort heroin, but then when the weathermen made the news, it started to become almost vogue, this notion that you could inject heroin and somehow still be functional."

Perkins was working the city's drug unit when the overdose call came in. He remembered finding Lamarre unconscious in the bathroom of his well-appointed apartment, before rescue squad workers arrived. Lamarre

survived, barely, moving away from the region soon after.

Friends of overdosing users commonly chuck them into the bathtub and try to revive them with ice or cold water, to avoid having to call 911, which could draw police to the scene, along with criminal charges. One police officer I know showed up to an overdose call to find an unconscious man on the floor, a frozen fish on his neck, a frozen bottle of soda shoved into his pants, ice all over the floor—and the user’s friends long gone from the scene.

In a region of just over a quarter-million people, a blue-dot Democratic stronghold in the center of a hilly rural red, Roanoke is a smallish city, transformed in the mid-1880s into a gritty railroad town and now, more than a century later, striving to become a health care, neuroscience, and medical-research hub. “We’re really going from Train City to Brain City,” a city manager recently enthused.

But Roanoke retains its safe, small-town feel with an almost Mayberry level of friendliness. Shortly after I moved here in 1989, a grocery store clerk picked up my bag of shiitakes and cheerfully wanted to know, “Lordy, what are you fixing with these?” A neighbor and journalist friend who spent the bulk of her career in Philadelphia still chuckles when I lock my doors. She used to lock her doors in Philly, but here in Roanoke she travels for days at a time and leaves her house wide open.

“The opioid epidemic is an urban story, a suburban story, and a rural story,” said Dr. Jennifer Wells, a Roanoke addiction specialist who has patients from each of these demographics, including one mom with five kids in a countryside trailer and no running water who somehow manages to make it to her group therapy meetings every week.

“Roanoke is just big enough where all the stories meet.”

The skin-popping weathermen represented Roanoke’s first wake-up call. But it was wrongly viewed, by myself and other area journalists, as an anomaly. The story was so tawdry that the *Roanoke Times* assigned two beat reporters to track it, one from courts and the other from media and

entertainment. It received much more attention, for instance, than the national story that broke in our backyard when Purdue Pharma settled with the feds a year later.

Before the weathermen incident, heroin had been the domain of police and court reporters in Roanoke, widely believed to be an inner-city (read: black) drug. “In the ’80s and ’90s, maybe a few dozen people were doing heroin here,” said Don Wolthuis, the assistant U.S. attorney who became one of the federal government’s top heroin prosecutors in the state’s western half. “Because heroin is a depressant, people kind of withdraw; they go in a corner, shoot up, and sit there in the dark, in a fetal position. They weren’t out there committing crimes like with crack or meth. It was a largely invisible and isolated group.”

It was common knowledge back then, among the handful of mostly African-American heroin users and dealers in Roanoke, “that you don’t sell heroin to white people because they’ll turn you in,” as Wolthuis put it. In the mid-2000s, it was also common knowledge that the stronger and more dangerous the heroin, the more users yearned to have it, as Roanoke addiction researcher Warren Bickel, then working in Baltimore, described it.

“Herr-on is my girlfriend,” one of his patients told him, adopting the street pronunciation for the drug popular among African-American users. He’d come to Bickel’s lab with track marks on his neck—all his other veins were spent.

And what this patient wanted Bickel to know was no different than what the Lee County farmer meant when he told his doctor how OxyContin had stolen everything from him: Nothing’s more powerful than the morphine molecule, and once it has its hooks in you, nothing matters more.

Not love. Not family. Not sex. Not shelter. The only relationship that matters is between you and the drug.

Bickel went on to scientifically quantify the indifference of the typical opioid user, comparing the average nonaddicted person’s perception of the future—calculated to be 4.7 years—against an addicted user’s idea of the future, which is just nine days.

The first time I interviewed him, in 2016, Bickel said he hoped to design treatment methods that would not only predict future addictive behavior among children but might also help those at risk of becoming addicted

improve and extend their temporal views, therefore arming themselves against the scourge.

Though he'd won prestigious grants and awards for his groundbreaking work—he was often touted as a star of the growing Brain City constellation—I struggled to understand how Bickel's research applied to the real-life heroin users I knew, some of whom were now trading sex for drug money a few blocks from his office.

Could a Bickel-designed app have prevented Jesse Bolstridge's death? Where was the hope? When I asked him those questions, he pointed to a framed Chinese proverb that he takes inspiration from: "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."

But the larger question about hope continued to reverberate wherever I went. I heard a version of it from an overwhelmed family friend, who pulled me aside at a wedding party to tell me about her thirty-four-year-old addicted daughter and pleaded with me through tears: "Just tell me one thing, what can your book do to help me keep my daughter alive?"

My friend was discovering the same thing through experience that I was through my interviews: that the legal and medical structures meant to combat America's heroin epidemic were woefully disconnected, often at odds with one another, and full of unintended consequences.

A crack-turned-heroin-dealer with Philadelphia roots landed in Roanoke in 2006, the same time the weathermen began sweating through their long-sleeved shirts. Clifton "Lite" Lee made heroin an equal-opportunity drug, connecting with drug users, black and white, and figuring—correctly—that he could easily double his profit margin if he imported the drug to comparatively staid Roanoke rather than continue selling it solely in New Jersey and New York. When police caught two suburban teenagers middlemanning for Lee—selling heroin to their friends and keeping some for their own use—they were stunned by what their cellphones revealed: evidence implicating fifty other kids they'd been selling heroin to. Most attended Hidden Valley High School, in outlying Roanoke County's wealthiest neighborhood, home to insurance agents and doctors and lawyers.

“Lee was the guy willing to get the kids involved,” Wolthuis said, pulling out a handwritten organizational chart he’d put together to help him keep visual track. At the top of the pyramid were the nonusers like Lee, who were in it just for the money, and at the bottom were the addicted, including some whose names were crossed out—dead of overdose.

By the time Lee was sentenced to eleven years in prison, in 2008, prosecutors had pinned him with bringing a thousand bags of heroin into the region two to three times a week, paying \$5,000 for twenty bricks of heroin that his network then sold for \$30,000.

The growth in heroin users was as exponential as its 600 percent profit margin. The first bags sold in Roanoke were stamped with the names Funeral and Green Frog, and some had a purity of 90 percent, a concentration that addicted users quickly and made the dosages deadlier.

“I can remember lying in bed awake at night, thinking, how far is this thing gonna go?” Wolthuis said. “If you have a guy doing a chain of bank robberies, you catch him and the robberies stop.” But the problem with heroin is the lure of the morphine molecule. *Herr-on is my girlfriend*. Even as Wolthuis locked up the perpetrators, he suspected that the demand for heroin was already too entrenched. There were still plenty of user-sellers eager to get on the nearest heroin highway to fetch a new batch from Baltimore or Richmond or Paterson, New Jersey. Unlike Ronnie Jones and Clifton Lee, they didn’t aspire to get rich dealing dope. They just wanted to keep from getting dopesick.

The story of Clifton Lee and the addicts he serviced and created didn’t trickle down to me at the newspaper, where I wrote about family issues, until 2010. That year, the region’s only heroin-overdose death made headlines, not because it was unique but because it involved the twenty-one-year-old son of a prominent white businesswoman.

No one was paying attention to heroin arrests when they only concerned the children of inner-city black families. A 2009 *Roanoke Times* story suggesting that heroin was now closing in on the illicit use of OxyContin and prescribed fentanyl patches in popularity seemed to draw shrugs, even as one prosecutor publicly warned, “They’re skipping over pot and going

straight to heroin.”

Wolthuis may have been lying in bed worrying about Spencer Mumpower’s role in his classmate Scott Roth’s death, but no one, not even the do-gooders giving drug-prevention lectures in local high schools, talked about the kids left behind who were still using. It was as if heroin had settled peaceably into Hidden Valley, with its manicured lawns and attached multiple-car garages, and Scott and Spencer were the only two exposed. Hidden Valley was the perfect name.

Scott Roth bought the heroin that ended his life in an apartment in Roanoke’s Grandin Village, a retail hub fifteen minutes from the Hidden Valley split-level where he was raised. A neighborhood where locals dine on regionally sourced produce, take yoga classes, watch subtitled movies, spend thousands on Stickley sofas, and crowd the weekly farmer’s market, the village is full of tree-lined streets and solid 1920s-era brick homes with expansive carports.

As Spencer Mumpower prepared for prison for handing Scott Roth the heroin that resulted in his life-ending overdose, I spent the summer of 2012 trying to make sense of how two young men with educated, caring mothers and movie-star good looks could keep the severity of their drug habits hidden for so long. I wanted to alert readers to the growing scourge of heroin in our community, and with two teenage sons still at home, I hoped to inoculate my own family, too.

After all, information is power, I told myself. I talked to my older son about heroin so much that one of the last things he said to me when we dropped him off at college that fall was “I know! Don’t do heroin!” He rolled his eyes with an annoyance reserved for the exceedingly daft.

In the photo Robin Roth chose for her only child’s obituary, Scott Roth looked like one of the Backstreet Boys. Blond and breezy, he called his mom Rob and wore madras shorts and Izod shirts. He went by the nickname Vanilla Rice, from a cooking job he had at a Japanese steakhouse where he stunt-cooked tableside, juggling knives and shrimp, rapping as he

chopped.

He was a likable young man, polite to strangers, nice to his single mom. He loved the sunflowers she grew on their spacious lawn. She was only mildly annoyed when he invited his friends home to cook for them, using up all the food she'd bought to last them the week.

He'd been using drugs off and on roughly since the age of seventeen, in 2006. The first time he came home clearly impaired, his mom decided to respond boldly. A registered nurse, she wanted to scare him a little, so rather than give him a take-home drug test from CVS, she took him to the emergency room.

Her plan backfired when the emergency-room doctor returned with Scott's test results. "It's only marijuana, Mrs. Roth," he said, a response that still sends her into a fury.

It was all the ammunition Scott needed, over the course of his remaining short life, to dismiss his mom's warnings.

"Lighten up, Rob," he told her.

But there was reason for Robin's concern. Later, Scott admitted that he'd smoked his first heroin in 2006, around the time the news broke about the skin-popping weathermen. He was at a high school party when someone handed him a joint laced with heroin, and the high was so soothing, so enveloping, that he realized right away this was something special, something new.

"You think of heroin as seedy street slums, but that's not at all how it started," Robin told me. About a year after their ER visit, she found a needle and a syringe in Scott's room and, figuring he was already in too deep, she left them there. Afraid he'd resort to sharing needles, she put him in rehab instead.

She tried everything she could think of to help her son, from attending Families Anonymous twelve-step meetings for relatives of people suffering from addiction to driving him to weekly drug tests at a doctor's office. She took away his car after an alcohol-fueled fender bender in her driveway, and after he turned eighteen, she kicked him out of the house whenever she found him drinking or doing drugs. She had every door inside the house removed—including the ones to the bathrooms—so he could not hide his drug use inside her home.

When I met her, two years after her son's death, she still had not gotten

around to putting the doors back on. Racked with guilt and grief, she could no longer work. At Scott's funeral Mass, friends had arrived with sunflowers, his favorite, placing them on the altar. Robin dried them and saved the seeds, and though she was too depressed to plant them the next year, a neighbor tilled up a garden plot in her side yard the following spring.

There she planted sunflowers by the hundreds. They grew so tall that they dwarfed her when she stood among them. It became her favorite place, her favorite thing to do, standing in the sunflower grove, listening to the wind chimes on a nearby apple tree that Scott had planted for her one long-ago Mother's Day. She felt closest to him there, especially when the wind whipped down Sugar Loaf Mountain and through her subdivision, the chimes banging out their bittersweet tune.

That summer, Robin brought a cardboard box full of sunflower seeds for me to our first interview, wrapped up in a bow. Sunflowers were her touchstone, not unlike the 55 on Jesse Bolstridge's football jersey. She texted me pictures of them repeatedly, along with snapshots of her very happy and very silly knife-wielding Vanilla Rice. She shared her favorite-ever picture, of a ten-year-old Scotty, the classic headless-at-the-beach trick where he's buried in sand up to his neck.

In Roanoke, 2012 was the tail end of the epidemic's stealth phase. Two hours up I-81 in the rolling farming country of the northern Shenandoah Valley, the epidemic was now rearing its head, too—though mostly still in pill form—and the news of its presence was even slower to emerge.

Jesse Bolstridge was now in high school and trading his ADHD medication Adderall to classmates who liked the way it allowed them to drink all night without passing out. In exchange, they plied him with painkillers, either bought on the black market or pilfered from their parents' or grandparents' medicine cabinets.

Like most parents of the addicted, Kristi Fernandez can't pinpoint the moment when her son's life became hostage to prescription pills. It was sometime after Jesse was diagnosed with Lyme meningitis at fifteen, sometime in between the half dozen high school football and snowboarding injuries that landed him in doctors' offices and emergency rooms, where he

was prescribed opioid painkillers including Oxycodone, Vicodin, and Percocet “thirties,” as he later referred to the 30-milligram pills, his drug of choice.

“The boy had so many rounds of stitches, so many concussions and broken bones from playing football, I lost track,” Kristi said. By his junior year, Jesse had sustained so many concussions that a neurologist told her he’d have to quit football if he got injured again.

What Kristi didn’t understand then was how much the drugs calmed him, dulled the purr of his motor, made him feel “normal,” as he would later confide. She didn’t know then, either, that Jesse and his friends were trading the bought and stolen pills around widely at so-called pharm parties.

Kristi remembers the first time someone in town suggested her son had a pill problem. Jesse had spent the night at a friend’s, and the friend’s mother called to accuse him of stealing Percocet from her bathroom cabinet. Kristi defended her son, even suggesting that it had been the woman’s son, not Jesse, who swiped the pills.

The manager of a temp agency, Kristi is a businesswoman. Civic-minded, she has always followed the news about nearby towns Strasburg and Woodstock. But the only 2010 stories that would have been of relevance to her son’s story had been occluded by bigger, headline-making news: the attempted bank robbery by a local young man, someone she didn’t then know. One among a small but growing group of area heroin users, Brandon Perullo had become so desperate in his dopesickness that he tried to rob a bank, donning a bandana and a black hoodie. He entered the bank twice before demanding cash by handing the teller a threatening note, but his jittery demeanor had already given him away. Brandon was arrested, unarmed, as he exited the building with \$1,860 in cash.

At his February 2011 sentencing hearing, the twenty-seven-year-old described the growing problem in the region, offering to tell his story to teenagers to warn them away from the drug. “No mistake is too big that I can’t bounce back from,” Brandon told the judge, who sentenced him to three and a half years in prison.

In a quaint town full of historical markers and pricey antiques, the bank

robbery in Woodstock made headlines across the Shenandoah Valley. Brandon's mother, Laura Hadden, begged the local newspaper to write about the growing heroin scourge. Her son wasn't the only one buying pills and heroin from mules and commuter dealers driving to Baltimore, she told an editor. "But they blew me off. It was more interesting to write about my son being arrested for robbing a bank!" she said.

Just before Brandon left for prison, in 2011, the local sheriff teamed with school prevention workers to hold the first community-wide meeting about opioid addiction.

Stigma was the real enemy of hope for the drug-addicted, Hadden decided. So to tamp it down, she decided her job was to explain the misunderstood science of addiction: Once a person becomes addicted, he loses his power of choice; his free will becomes hijacked along with the opioid receptors in his brain. When a person's natural opioids are shut down by the deluge of synthetic ones, she told the audience at the community meeting, it creates a growing tolerance to the drug, making the brain crave ever-larger quantities of opioids just to keep from being violently ill.

Hadden asked the parents to imagine this: You haven't been able to eat for three days, and you're starving. Then someone shoves a plate of delicious food in front of you and leaves you alone with it—but it's strictly off-limits.

Because of the urge to quell that insatiable hunger, she told them, young people in their midst were now "driving up to Baltimore, bringing the heroin back here, and selling it like crazy. People you don't even think would be using heroin are using it."

But Hadden's lesson about dopamine-overloaded neurons and Baltimore drug deals fell on the deaf ears of the select attendees. No one wants to believe that heroin will ever touch the veins of their children.

"Maybe ten people showed up, and no one asked me a single question," she recalled. "The response was a joke."

Years later, not long after her son was released from prison, Hadden began a second, more urgent round of drug-prevention advocacy. Soon after Brandon got out, he moved to New York, to live near his father and his tight-knit extended Italian family, because it was almost impossible to get hired anywhere around Woodstock with a felony record.

Brandon was doing well at first, working for his dad and teaching

bodybuilding on the side. But seven months after his release from prison, he relapsed. His family encouraged him to seek treatment, Hadden said, but it was as if some remote dictator had claimed eminent domain on his brain. He died two weeks later from an overdose of cocaine and heroin.

His mother believes her son died by suicide, driven by his outsized fear of becoming dopesick. “I wonder, to this day, whether he just couldn’t do it anymore,” she told me.

Two days before his death, Brandon posted on Facebook: “I hope people remember all the good I’ve done.”

Kristi had not been among those Brandon’s mom tried to warn in 2011. If Jesse had any problem at all, she told herself, it had to do with pills, not heroin. But over the next year, her own mother’s wedding ring would turn up missing along with some cash and more pills. And Kristi could deny the severity of her son’s addiction no longer. Her husband, Jesse’s stepdad, insisted she install a lock on their bedroom door.

And though she still feels guilty about it, she did.

In 2012 there weren’t yet Facebook groups to connect the suffering parents in different parts of the state, to share tips about rehab and coping strategies, or to offer physical and monetary support.

Back then Robin Roth felt as if she walked around Roanoke with a giant *F* on her forehead, branded as a parenting failure. She suffered in silence and anger, much of it directed toward the young man she held responsible for the death of her only child. At Spencer Mumpower’s 2012 federal court sentencing, Robin carried a framed portrait of Scott to the witness stand. She looked directly at Spencer, his dark mass of curly hair now neatly shorn, and leveled a litany of questions designed to make him understand the pain his actions had caused:

“Spencer, will you be there to visit me when I am old and lonely? Neither will Scott.

“Spencer, will you be there to eat dinner with me, mow my lawn, and wish me a happy birthday? Neither will Scott.

“Spencer, will you be there to hold my hand when I am sick and dying? Neither will Scott.”

Her anger was so palpable that U.S. District Court Judge James Turk, an affable octogenarian who shook every defendant’s hand and brought his dachshund mix, Baby Girl, to court, encouraged her to meet with Spencer before he left for prison. Turk had already sentenced the dealer who supplied the drugs to twenty years; Spencer had played middle man in the deal, pleading guilty and helping prosecutors nab his roommate dealer in exchange for a lighter, eight-year sentence.

“I think it would help you,” Turk told Robin, gently, from the bench, as Spencer sat.

But Robin declined, saying she wasn’t ready.

In the summer of 2012, I followed Robin and Spencer as Spencer prepared for prison. I gave Spencer rides to karate classes, recording our conversations with his permission as I drove. At a KFC lunch buffet, I watched him cheerfully demonstrate a recipe he’d picked up during his earlier jail stint on state charges: blending packets of ketchup, Tabasco, and barbecue sauce.

I sat near his relatives as he graduated from drug court, looking childlike in his too-big suit. I spent a Saturday with him while he volunteered his time teaching first-time teenage drug offenders and their worried parents, who leaned in intently, trying to divine where Spencer’s parents had gone wrong. I found it impossible not to like the kid, honestly. I could ask him anything my mind conjured up, and he would answer me warmly and enthusiastically. He seemed more concerned about being honest than trying to control the narrative.

In a freewheeling talk full of advice and drug-detecting techniques that was half *Scared Straight* and half *American Gangster*, Spencer had parents alternately laughing, wincing, and crying as he displayed the needle-mark scars on his arms and the teeth once ruined by amphetamines, now restored by forty hours of dental work. He showed off his jailhouse tattoos, fashioned by burning Vaseline mixed with VO5 Shampoo and a contraband staple, though he’d since had those neatened up, too.

He discussed the dangers of black-market Adderall, an ADHD medicine and amphetamine he once took hourly for eight days straight. He recited a list of places where he'd hidden his stash as a teenager—inside computers, emptied Sharpie markers, and socks, and in the pockets of gym shorts he secretly wore under his jeans. “My mom made me empty the pockets of my jeans, but she didn’t know about the shorts,” he said.

He shared tips that, in my view, remain among the best prevention advice I’ve seen dispensed to parents of at-risk teens: Rid your medicine cabinets of anything that has *codone*, indicative of morphine components, in the name. Set rules and hold kids accountable when they break them, even if it means they go to jail. “The problem with me was, the trouble had to outweigh the fun,” he said. Though his mother, Ginger Mumpower, had sent him to fifteen different rehab facilities, for eight years Spencer managed to use and sell drugs before his name ever entered a police blotter.

He described what led to his decision to quit selling drugs after being targeted by local police in a catch-and-release drug bust in 2009. Hoping to convert him into a confidential informant, police had taken his drugs and told him, “We’re gonna wait for you to mess up again so we can catch you again and get you for more things,” Spencer recounted, an oversimplification that police only partially confirmed. The threat was enough to make him give up dealing, but in a case of warped reasoning he believed he could still keep using heroin without getting caught. He allowed his dealer to live with him in exchange for drugs.

When Scott Roth showed up at Spencer’s apartment to buy heroin, the two hadn’t seen each other since high school at Hidden Valley, some three years before. They were never best friends, just drug buddies who hung out in the basement of the home of a fellow partyer whose dad gave them space to get high and routinely shot up heroin in front of them, according to both Spencer and Robin Roth.

Spencer played go-between in the deal, a move that resulted in death by overdose for Scott in April 2010 and prison for Spencer and his roommate dealer.

When Scott showed up on his doorstep that night, Spencer was already a full-blown heroin junkie. In his jailhouse mug shot, his eyes are bruised and sunken, and there are chicken-pox-like scabs on his face—from the itch of amphetamines, to which he was also addicted. He weighed 135 pounds.

“One day in jail I realized I could touch these two fingers around my forearm,” he told me, making a C out of his thumb and middle finger. “It meant I was a junkie.” When fellow inmates teased him about how skinny he was, he started lifting weights in his cell. He fashioned them out of trash bags he filled with water, tying them with bedsheets ripped into strips. He used the money his mom put on his jail commissary account to amass multiple cartons of milk, to help build up his muscles—by trading ramen noodles and bags of coffee for his cellmates’ quarts of milk.

For eleven months, his mother refused to bail him out, and even though she knew that jails and prisons could be rife with drugs, she also believed that jail was her best chance for keeping Spencer alive while he awaited federal sentencing. She encouraged church friends and relatives to write to him. His sister, Paris, an art student, mailed poems and drawings. Ginger sent him inspirational song lyrics, copies of pages she’d marked from the Bible and *The Purpose Driven Life*.

His lawyer, Tony Anderson, recalled his transformation: “After six months of begging for his mother to bail him out, he finally hit bottom and accepted he had nowhere to go but up.” Spencer soon realized, “I like being clean. I like being sober. I like being able to talk to my mother and she talks to me, and I get what’s going on here.”

As his counselor Vinnie Dabney remembered it, “Fifteen rehabs had not convinced Spencer that it was not in his best interests to get high. It took time in jail and a friend dying before he could decide he wanted to change.”

In our interviews, Spencer was alternately immature and wise. His goal, he told me, was to get in shape, physically and mentally; to earn some karma before he went away to federal prison. “God knows, I’ve got a lot I need to build back up,” he said.

He was happy to school me on drug culture—how he’d once saved his lunch money to buy weed and cocaine, the way he extracted the gel out of a fentanyl pain patch and smoked it, where the best places were to find drug dealers (loitering outside Narcotics Anonymous meetings). Driving by a diabetes-supply pharmacy, he recalled once buying OxyContin off a pharmacy delivery driver. The driver was eventually arrested. “But

somehow he had another six hundred or seven hundred pills the next day. That's a shitload of dope." he said.

Spencer talked about his drug counselor, Dabney, who years before had been a mostly functioning heroin user for three decades, snorting a much less potent form. "It's hard to explain, but some people can manage it. Like if I knew that none was gonna be in till Friday, and it's Tuesday, and I normally do ten bags a day but I only have thirty left, I would do the math and make sure I had enough to last till Sunday...because you'll do anything to make sure you're not dopesick."

He even offered parenting advice for one of my friends, whose son had already been busted for smoking weed, once in a northern city, where it was deemed a misdemeanor, and once on a Blue Ridge Parkway overlook—where it was on federal property and therefore a federal offense. "When he's eighteen, tell him to move to a state where [marijuana] is legal. Until then, tell him he'd better start lifting weights because he's not gonna do well in jail. Scare the hell out of him, if you can. But honestly, there's only a small percentage of kids you can get through to. When I was that age, I didn't want to hear it either."

Spencer was making amends to his mother, apologizing almost daily for the hell he'd put her through and helping with her latest jewelry-store opening. As she recalled committing him to a psychiatric facility after he'd busted himself out of a Christian rehab in West Virginia, Spencer immediately stood up and walked over to hug her for maybe the fourth time that day.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I know," she said.

With his mom's help, he drafted a letter of apology to Robin Roth and mailed it to her therapist, who would decide when she was strong enough to read it. In it, Spencer offered, when he got out of prison, to mow her grass. From his prison cell, he would even donate to her the inheritance he received following his grandmother's death.

All told, Spencer had already lost twelve friends from Hidden Valley to drug-involved deaths, and every dealer he knew was either dead now or in jail. And he would soon lose several more.

He was hale and hearty by the time his mother drove him to a minimum-security federal prison in Petersburg, Virginia, in August 2012. Drug-free for more than two years, Spencer admitted that he'd replaced his opioid addiction with kenpo karate, taking classes almost daily and learning breathing techniques to deal with the anxiety of going to prison. His karate instructor, Rikk Perez, had become a father figure to him; Spencer was estranged, off and on, from his own dad. Perez taught Spencer exercises he could practice in his cell, like slow foot taps that progress up a cinder-block wall.

Being fit brought Spencer a feeling of confidence as he left for prison, where he hoped to finish his bachelor's degree. After his release, he planned to dedicate himself to helping young people with addiction, in memory of Scott Roth.

I called Robin the day Spencer's mom helped him report to prison. She said knowing that Spencer was behind bars again brought her no comfort.

"I hurt as much today as the day my son died," she said, choking up. "I pray for Spencer every day, that he'll be strong. My heart's breaking for that kid. But it's the only shot he has at a normal life—to get some accountability."

As the months wore on, Robin began to soften toward Spencer. That fall, she started spending her Friday nights with troubled teenagers and their worried parents in a setting similar to the court-ordered Saturday sessions where Spencer had spoken.

She was learning that in her loss, she was far from alone. She and Ginger both were beginning to see that all the sunflowers and speeches in the world would not slow the epidemic's spread. Ginger, a minor celebrity in town from her own ads for her business as well as from a failed campaign for state delegate, was recognized as a friendly face. At her new Ginger's Jewelry store, a day rarely passed when someone didn't show up at her counter wanting advice on something other than gold. Distraught parents might pretend to shop for a few minutes, but before long they'd mention the newspaper articles, and the tear-filled stories would tumble out.

A pastor's wife with two addicted sons drove from two hours away to search her out. A sixty-three-year-old nurse was struggling to take care of her infant grandson because her twenty-five-year-old heroin-addicted daughter could not.

While Ronnie Jones was establishing his clientele in the northern Shenandoah Valley, young people in Roanoke were driving right past Woodstock on their way to Baltimore, Philadelphia, or Newark, or taking the Chinatown bus to New York, where they could pay \$100 for fifty bags of heroin, stamped with names like Blue Magic or Gucci, then resell them in Roanoke for six to eight times their investment.

A drug-use survey of Roanoke-area high school students bore out the trend. In the fall of 2012, 6.4 percent reported using heroin one or more times, and almost 10 percent said they'd tried illicit prescription drugs. A local prevention counselor warned that the two percentages were in the process of flipping because heroin was becoming so much cheaper and easier to get.

The Families Anonymous meetings in town were filling up. Six years had passed since the weathermen's final forecast, and the storm had settled in.

While Robin Roth searched for solace in sunflowers and Ginger Mumpower relaxed for the first time in years—knowing that in prison, at least, her son would likely not die of a drug overdose—parents up and down America's heroin highways struggled to find the right culprit, or set of culprits, to blame.

But mostly they kept quiet about it, shut down in their grief and their shame.



*Hidden Valley High School, Roanoke County,
Virginia*

Chapter Six

“Like Shooting Jesus”

An hour south of Roanoke, in a part of the state once dominated by unfettered industry, Martinsville, Virginia, was stuck in an economic

morass. In 2012 the small city of thirteen thousand laid claim to having the highest unemployment rate in Virginia for twelve years. For most of the twentieth century, it had been the state's industrial powerhouse, packed with textile and furniture factories, home to more millionaires per capita than any other city in the nation. But nearly half its jobs went away when the millionaires sent the textile work to Honduras and Mexico in the wake of NAFTA in 1994, and the furniture jobs to China after that.

Bill Clinton had predicted that China's 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization would eventually create a "win-win" for workers. American companies would theoretically be able to export products to China's growing consumer class, an argument Wall Street championed when stock prices climbed with every new plant-closing announcement. Corporate shareholders and CEOs ate up Clinton's prediction, a cheery best-case version of Adam Smith's eighteenth-century "invisible hand." As the economists described it, Chinese peasants would better their lot by making chairs in factories, while dislocated American workers would retrain for more fulfilling, advanced jobs.

But with ill-designed training for displaced Americans based on a lumbering federal program created in the 1960s, the second part of that equation very rarely came to pass. Only a third of workers who qualified for Trade Adjustment Assistance even went back to school, and the majority of those who did found themselves with new certifications and associate's degrees yet earning much less than they had in the factories, if they were working at all. The ones I met who were coping the best worked part-time at Walmart, supplementing their pay with food stamps, food pantry donations, and small vegetable gardens.

Consumers all got cheaper jeans, yes, but what did that matter to the people who had once stitched them if they were now out of work and couldn't afford new clothes? The global economy created winners and losers, Bassett Furniture CEO Rob Spilman told me, explaining the dismissal of some eight thousand furniture workers from his payroll. "It was that or perish," he said. "At the end of the day, we are not a social experiment."

In rural counties decimated by globalization, automation, and the decline of coal, the invisible hand manifested in soaring crime, food insecurity, and disability claims. In Martinsville and surrounding Henry County,

unemployment rates rose to above 20 percent, food stamp claims more than tripled, and disability rates went up 60.4 percent.

What those numbers looked like on the ground, as I began reporting on the recession in 2008 for the *Roanoke Times* and later for my first book, *Factory Man* (published in 2014), could be distilled in two images I observed but did not fully, at the time, comprehend:

The first was of adults—black and white, old and young—arriving at area food pantries two hours before the doors opened, the older among them clutching canes or leaning on walkers. The second was the smoldering remains of an abandoned furniture factory in the town of Bassett, near Martinsville. An unemployed thirty-four-year-old was attempting to rip out copper electrical wires to resell on the black market when he inadvertently sparked a fire that burned the shuttered factory down. In his police mug shot, you could see the burns on his face.

It was easy to understand the connection between joblessness and hunger, to get that hunger fueled some of the crime. It was growing clearer, too, that the federal disability program was becoming a de facto safety net for the formerly employed, a well-intentioned but ultimately disastrous way of incentivizing poor people to stay sick, with mental illness and chronic pain—conditions that are hard to prove and frequently associated with mental health and substance use disorders—prompting the majority of disability awards.

That same pattern was playing out in the Lee County coalfields, where some parents coaxed their children's doctors toward ADHD diagnoses, knowing that such behavioral problems could help make them eligible for Social Security disability when they became adults. "Ritalin is a pipeline to disability here," one Lee County health care manager told me, describing the federal program as a coping mechanism for poverty and workplace uncertainties.

A hospital administrator I know from nearby eastern Kentucky recalled a Drug Abuse Resistance Education officer asking her high school classmates what they wanted to be when they grew up.

"A drawer," one young man said.

"You mean an artist?"

"No, a *draw-er*."

Someone who draws disability checks. It was the only avenue he could

imagine for himself, the only way to get himself and his family fed. Well over half of Lee County's working-age men—a staggering 57.26 percent—didn't work. (The trend line was somewhat better among women, around 44 percent.)

If OxyContin was the new moonshine in rural America, disability was the new factory work. By 2016, for every unemployed American man between the ages of twenty-two and fifty-five, an additional three were neither working nor looking for work. Having dropped out of the workforce entirely, they had numerically vanished from the kind of monthly jobs reports touted by politicians and reporters.

Many turned up instead in disability statistics, which were largely ignored in headline-grabbing economic reports. Disability claims nearly doubled from 1996 to 2015. The federal government spent an estimated \$192 billion on disability payments in 2017 alone, more than the combined total for food stamps, welfare, housing subsidies, and unemployment assistance.

For people who have not ventured recently into rural America, the jaw-dropping and visible decline of work comes as a shocker, an outgrowth of the nation's widening political and cultural divide. Before the 2016 election of Donald Trump, that disconnect was maintained by a national media that paid little attention to rural, predominantly white places like St. Charles or Bassett, where the country's much-hailed economic recovery had definitely not trickled down.

At the same time, it had never been within the purview of local papers like the *Martinsville Bulletin* to investigate what was happening with international trade in Washington or New York, much less the latest push by Big Pharma or global drug cartels. And regional newspapers like my own *Roanoke Times* had drastically shrunk their coverage to a mainly urban and suburban core, ignoring the increasingly distressed communities in our hinterlands just when reporting on those places was needed the most.

Those of us living highly curated and time-strapped lives in cities across America—predominantly mixing virtually and physically with people whose views echoed our own—had no idea how politically and economically splintered our nation had become. And also how much poorer and sicker and work-starved the already struggling parts of the nation truly were—because we didn't follow that story.

We may feel more connected by our cellphones and computers, but in reality we are more divided than ever before.

In the midsized city where I live, OxyContin continued to be viewed as a rural problem into the early 2010s—a problem in the coalfields, some four hours to the west. While the *Roanoke Times* covered the 2007 sentencing hearing of Purdue Pharma executives, it rarely mentioned OxyContin after that. We in Roanoke had heard opioid abuse was seeping into distressed factory towns like those in Henry County, but very rarely did our newspaper report on it.

We were safe in our ignorance, or so we thought—content to stereotype drug addiction as the affliction of jobless hillbillies, a small group of inner-city blacks, and a few misguided suburban kids.

But another invisible hand was upon us.

Heinrich Dreser’s drug moved seamlessly across city and county lines, with zero regard for politics, race, neighborhood, or class.

I didn’t understand the connection between rural poverty, disability, and opioid addiction until I learned more about the accidental Bassett Furniture arsonist. Turned out he’d arrived at his copper heist on the outskirts of Bassett on his bicycle—a rare sight in the rolling foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

“He was one of the unemployed masses; he did not have a paying job,” said the prosecutor (now a judge) in his case. “But his crime actually required work, so he wasn’t lazy so much as he was desperate.” Like so many of the region’s petty thieves, the arsonist was propelled by fear of becoming dopesick, added another local prosecutor, who told me that 75 percent of all police calls in the county now involved heroin or methamphetamine, or, increasingly, a combination of both.

Not only were rates of unemployment, disability, and opioid addiction soaring, but there was also renewed interest in methamphetamines and the practice of switching between opioids (in the form of either pills or their much cheaper cousin, heroin) and meth. “Crystal meth controls all the dockets now” in rural Virginia, a local drug task force officer told me. “If you’re addicted to painkillers, you become so lethargic you can hardly

function. But meth keeps you going if you need to run the streets to go get your next dose of heroin or pills, to keep you from getting sick. It allows you to function. There's a reason they call it 'high-speed chicken feed.'"

I thought immediately of Spencer Mumpower's 2010 jail mug shot. So much separated Spencer, whose mother had sent him to private school and then paid for fifteen different rehabs, from the young man who stripped copper wire out of the abandoned furniture factory. A scrawny junkie with sunken eyes and sticky-out collarbones, as Spencer described himself to me in 2012, "I looked ridiculous, like I had chicken pox. Like I'd stuck my head down a groundhog's lair."

But I had failed, just as the police and parents had, to connect young adults like Spencer to the rural addicted, even though Spencer told me he'd come to his heroin addiction the same way they had—through prescription opioid pills.

Our culture seems to excuse drug- and other risk-taking in white middle- and upper-middle-class kids, especially young men. The same liberties, when taken by rural poor whites or people of color—wherever they live—come across as more desperate, born of fundamental wants or needs that can't be satisfied. But as I've come to learn, gauged strictly by drug use, there is no less urgency and desperation in America's middle and upper classes today.

Drug epidemics unfold "like a vector phenomenon, where you have one individual who seeds that community and then the spread begins," said Dr. Anna Lembke, an addiction-medicine specialist at the Stanford University School of Medicine and the author of *Drug Dealer, MD*. People whose parents or grandparents were drug- or alcohol-addicted have dramatically increased odds of becoming addicted themselves, with genetics accounting for 50 to 60 percent of that risk, Lembke explained; she noted that the correlation between family history and depression is much lower, 30 percent. Other risk factors for addiction include poverty, unemployment, multigenerational trauma, and access to drugs.

"It's important to note, it's really not just the unemployed and the poor who are vulnerable today; it's really everybody, especially underchallenged

youths or youths who aren't engaged in school or other meaningful activities," Lembke said.

At the age of thirteen, Spencer had stolen five bottles of painkillers more than halfway full—leftovers prescribed to different relatives in the aftermath of routine outpatient surgeries. By fourteen, he was taking pills regularly. Back then he used saved-up lunch money to buy weed, which he then traded for ADHD medications prescribed to his friends, or for OxyContin pilfered from their parents' medicine chests.

"I did my first bag of heroin before I drank my first bottle of beer," Spencer said.

In his Hidden Valley subdivision, full of sprawling ranches, trim colonial two-stories, and Arts and Crafts bungalows that were new but meant to look old, heroin was easier to get. "When we first started doing it, we didn't worry about getting caught because cops didn't know what heroin even looked like.

"One time I got pulled over, I had ten bags at my feet, and they didn't know what it was so they didn't look at it."

In rural America, the opioid epidemic aged into a wily adolescence in the aughts. In the hinterlands of Virginia, it had tended to pool in families. "We'd sometimes have one overdose where the son would die, then the next day the father would die, then the next day the mother would die," the Roanoke-based medical examiner said. "If it had been an infectious disease, there would have been widespread panic."

Then—Virginia Tech researcher Martha Wunsch remembered the moment she went from studying overdose deaths in rural counties, funded by a National Institutes of Health grant, to hearing about it from her own teenagers, who went to high school with Spencer and Scott Roth. State health officials in Richmond had originally dismissed her research, telling her the same thing they'd said to Sue Cantrell, the rural health-department director: "This is a regional problem."

"The issue is Interstate 81," Wunsch told me. "The OxyContin epidemic spread from East Nowhere Jesus all up and down the Appalachian chain by way of the interstate, and suddenly my own kids were coming home from

parties,” talking about pills being passed around in bowls.

Opioids infiltrated the toniest suburbs not by way of families but by peer groups. The new suburban users didn’t come to the attention of police until roughly around the time Purdue Pharma launched its 2010 abuse-resistant version of the drug, at the same time Spencer handed Scott Roth the heroin that led to his death—fourteen years after OxyContin was introduced.

In Roanoke, the urban hub for the western half of the state, I-81 perches at the edge of the northern suburbs. It rolls and undulates, connecting western Appalachian communities from Tennessee to Virginia as it travels northeast around Roanoke and up through the northern Shenandoah Valley, intersecting with other interstates leading to Baltimore and Washington, New Jersey and New York.

One of the most segregated cities in the South, Roanoke had long had a steady but largely quiet group of heroin users in its urban core, which positioned it to become an ideal transfer station for the region’s transition from dope to pills, then back to dope. It was the perfect incubator for the opioid epidemic—a cultural and geographic crossroads. It was big enough for users to easily forge drug connections and yet small enough for the drug dealers to hide out.

Some dealers, traditionally ensconced in the city’s poorest, northwest quadrant, were beginning to migrate to the more affluent neighborhoods of Hidden Valley and Cave Spring, one heroin task officer told me—to avoid robberies and home invasions.

“As long as it was in the lower economic classes and marginalized groups, like musicians and people of ethnic minorities, it was OK because it was with *those people*,” said Spencer’s counselor, Vinnie Dabney, an African American who took his first sniff from a bag of heroin his sophomore year of high school, in 1968, and was a mostly functional user for thirty years. (Needle-phobic, he never once shot up.) Back then you could maintain that way because the drug’s potency was low—3 to 7 percent, compared with 40 to 60 percent today—and the police paid little attention, since white kids in the suburbs weren’t dying or nodding out in the football bleachers.

“But the moment it crossed those boundary lines from the inner city into the suburbs, it became an ‘epidemic,’” said Dabney, shaking his head. After two drug-related jail stints, he left court-ordered treatment in the late 1990s to get a master’s in counseling and now works as a mental health and substance abuse counselor who leads support groups for users taking the maintenance drug buprenorphine, or bupe (more commonly known by the brand name Suboxone). “It’s ludicrous, this thing that’s been knocking on your door for over a hundred years, and you’ve ignored it until finally it’s like a battering ram taking your doors off the hinges.

“It’s a monster now, but nobody paid any attention to it until their cars were getting robbed, and their kids were stealing their credit cards.” The worst of it, Dabney warned, was that people were getting hooked at even younger ages, and making the switch faster from pills to heroin.

It took a while for the force of the battering ram to register. Unlike in the coalfields, where addicted users quickly resorted to thievery to fund their next fix, in the suburbs the epidemic spread stealthily because users had ready access to money. Many of them were teenagers selling electronic devices (then telling their parents they’d been stolen), or raiding their college savings accounts, or simply using their allowance. They were not engaging in “spot and steal,” not trading a mule for four pills, not wheeling stolen garden tillers down the street for everyone to see.

In the wealthiest Roanoke County suburbs, illicit pill-taking commenced, shared on TruGreened lawns, next to school lockers, and in carpeted basements while clueless parents in Cave Spring and Hidden Valley were making family dinners upstairs.

There was no widespread panic, because the teenagers and young adults had the money to keep their addictions at a low boil, and those parents who were in on the dirty little secret were too ashamed to let the neighbors know.

From California to Florida, the parents behind Relatives Against Purdue Pharma already knew that OxyContin stood out more in rural America’s distressed hollows and towns, where reps could easily target the lowest-hanging fruit—the injured jobless and people on disability, with Medicaid

cards. But OxyContin was everywhere, of course, and it had been almost since the beginning, even if the crimes associated with it hadn't dominated the urban news.

"The early suburban wave mostly stayed hidden...because parents there could afford to put their kids in a thirty- or sixty-day program," said Dr. Hughes Melton, an addiction specialist and now the Virginia Department of Health's chief deputy commissioner overseeing much of the state's response to the crisis. "You really didn't hear much about it until young people started dying."

It was the death of the funny young rapping chef, Scott Roth, with his mop of blond hair and life-of-the-party disposition, that should have put the Roanoke region on notice.

The weekend when most of his friends were going off to college, his mother had driven him to a rehab program at the local rescue mission. She remembers leaving him by the mission door in the rain, in his plaid shorts and Nautica shirt.

Spencer Mumpower helped me unpack the epidemic as it unfolded behind mall movie theaters and in wooded cul-de-sacs in the late aughts. But even though high school surveys showed suburban heroin use was growing in 2012 (it was then 3 percent higher in Roanoke County schools than the national average), parents and prevention workers alike underestimated Spencer's warnings, viewing his crime as an anomaly, maybe even an outlier case of bad parenting.

"We didn't understand the connection between heroin and pills at least until 2014," admitted Nancy Hans, an area drug-prevention coordinator. In 2010, her Prevention Council of Roanoke County initiated drug take-backs, events where citizens were encouraged to safely dispose of unused medications, but she wishes now that she had singled out opioids.

At the urging of local police, Hans instead launched a campaign to warn parents about synthetic bath salts in 2012, then in the public eye because they had caused bizarre behavior, including physical scuffles with police as well as the overdose deaths of two local young women. Shortly after President Obama signed a law banning the sale of the products, *Vice*

magazine swooped into Roanoke for a scoop. Looking back, the bath-salts blight was a red herring, problematic but short-lived—and a distraction from a much quieter, even deadlier drug.

“That’s how it got way out in front of us,” Hans said. “And the doctors didn’t see their role in it, either. When a doctor prescribed our teenagers thirty Percocet pills for a pulled wisdom tooth, we didn’t know to complain. It was like we were all in a big fog of denial.”

Within five years, Hans would have the numbers of multiple mothers of addicted kids programmed into her cellphone. She would find herself rushing from the funerals of heroin-overdosed twentysomethings to giving prevention talks in the auditoriums of the high schools they once attended. Spencer’s master class in drug abuse had gone unheeded, boxed away into a category of Things That Happen to Other Families.

Andrew Bassford, the assistant U.S. attorney who prosecuted Spencer’s case, took an angry phone call from the Roanoke County school superintendent, who was mad that he’d openly addressed the accessibility of heroin and OxyContin in her schools.

“How dare you tell the newspaper these things?” the superintendent seethed.

Bassford, who also works as a brigadier general in the U.S. Army Reserve, was unmoved by the scolding.

“I say these things because I know them to be true,” he said. “Your schools are a pit because your students have money, and money attracts drugs.”

The Hidden Valley teenagers called the green 80-milligram Oxys Green Goblins. They scored them from an array of sources: a restaurant co-worker, a brother who’d had them prescribed in the wake of wisdom-tooth surgery, an Iraq war veteran who had legitimate pain but was prescribed twice as many pills as he needed and funneled the rest to the kids down the street in exchange for cash.

“Parents didn’t really know what was going on when it was just pills,” recalled Victoria (not her real name), who tried her first OxyContin pill her senior year after a friend ratted her out to school officials for smoking weed.

Victoria remembered the first time she tried to crush an abuse-resistant Oxy, following Purdue's long-awaited reformulation in 2010, and it worked exactly as Barbara Van Rooyan envisioned it would when she petitioned the FDA, demanding an opioid blocker, or antagonist, be added to the drug: "If you tried to crunch 'em, they'd gel up on you. You couldn't even snort 'em, let alone shoot 'em. After that, the pills either went dry or were just too expensive to get. And everybody who used to deal pills starting dealing heroin instead."

I noticed another, lesser-known pattern among the addicted suburbanites I interviewed: The Green Goblins were typically preceded by a starter pack of a very different drug. Almost to a person, the addicted twentysomethings I met had taken attention-deficit medication as children, prescribed pills that as they entered adolescence morphed from study aid to party aid. On college campuses, Ritalin and Adderall were not just a way to pull an all-nighter for the physics exam, never mind that they were prescribed to your roommate, not you; they also allowed a person to drink alcohol for hours on end without passing out. That made them a valuable currency, tradable for money and/or other drugs.

Between 1991 and 2010, the number of prescribed stimulants increased tenfold among all ages, with prescriptions for attention-deficit-disorder drugs tripling among school-age children between 1990 and 1995 alone. "And we're prescribing to ever- and ever-younger children, some kids as young as two years old," said Lembke, the addiction researcher.

"It's just nuts. Because if we really believe that addiction is a result of changes in the brain due to chronic heavy drug exposure, how can we believe that stimulant exposure isn't going to change these kids' brains in a way that makes them more vulnerable to harder drugs?" she added.

The science is far from clear, according to a 2014 data review. Some studies show that ADHD-diagnosed children treated with stimulants have lower rates of addiction to some substances than those who weren't medicated, while other studies suggest that exposure to stimulants in childhood can lead to addiction in adulthood.

"A lot of us think that doctors have overdiagnosed children with ADHD, so a diagnosis is something to very carefully discern, and parents should always monitor the medicines their children and teenagers are on," said Cheri Hartman, a Roanoke psychologist.

Lembke pins the opioid epidemic not just on physician overprescribing fueled by Big Pharma but also on the broader American narrative that promotes all pills as a quick fix. Between 1998 and 2005, the abuse of prescription drugs increased a staggering 76 percent.

While opioids have resulted in the direst consequences, Lembke is equally leery of benzodiazepines (prescribed for anxiety) and stimulants, both of which make teenagers—especially underchallenged kids who aren't engaged in meaningful activities—dangerously comfortable with the notion of taking pills. Any pills. Whether the pills originated in a bottle with their name on it or came from a bowl at a so-called pharm party.

Emergency-room administrator Dr. John Burton watched the cultural shift play out at the North Carolina YMCA summer camp he attended as a kid and returned to later as the camp doctor. Whereas very few campers took prescribed medications in the 1970s, by the mid-1990s 10 percent were taking a pill at some point during the day—most for asthma or allergy conditions, followed by a small subset of kids on behavioral medications, usually for ADHD.

By 2012, fully one-third of his campers were on meds, mostly ADHD medications, antidepressants, and antipsychotics. “What happens is, we’ve changed our whole culture, from one where kids don’t take pills at all to one where you’ve got a third or more of kids who are on pills to stay well because of what are believed to be chronic health conditions,” Burton said. “They get so used to taking pills that eventually they end up using them for a recreational high.”

So it went that young people barely flinched at the thought of taking Adderall to get them going in the morning, an opioid painkiller for a sports injury in the afternoon, and a Xanax to help them sleep at night, many of the pills doctor-prescribed. So it went that two-thirds of college seniors reported being offered prescription stimulants for nonmedical use by 2012—from friends, relatives, and drug dealers.

“In the short term, kids and parents and even teachers may feel better” about Adderall’s ability to enhance memory and attention, Lembke said. “But studies show that over the long term those kids don’t do any better in school than people who don’t receive stimulants.”

And among those whose stimulant usage becomes a gateway to harder drugs, they’re doing much worse. That was true for Spencer Mumpower,

who routinely traded Adderall for marijuana, and Ritalin for cocaine. That was true for almost every addicted young adult I interviewed for this book.

As Spencer prepared for prison in the fall of 2012, the remainder of the Hidden Valley group with whom he'd abused drugs kept on as usual to avoid becoming dopesick. Whether that meant recruiting new users at parties or taking jobs at senior moving companies with the express intent of stealing opioids from retirees, targeting the expired or leftover prescriptions so the client wouldn't notice.

"If it was a current medication, I'd take just a couple," recalled a recovering heroin user I'll call Brian, then a Hidden Valley High School student, a doctor's son, and a member of the marching band. "If it was an old prescription, I'd take the whole bottle. Some old people would tell me, 'Just throw it away,' and I'd definitely take those."

Dependent on pills by age seventeen, Brian was twenty when a co-worker introduced him to heroin. He snorted it first from waxed-paper bags marked COLOMBIAN COFFEE and BLUE MAGIC, in wrappers so small he could hide them inside his phone case. "From the moment I did that first bag, I can tell you, looking back now, it was destined," he said. After snorting the crushed-up Oxys, inhaling the heroin powder was easy—and the heroin was cheaper, more intense, and, increasingly, it was everywhere he went. Though he was deeply troubled by Scott Roth's death, little else but drugs mattered anymore. Another friend taught him how to inject himself; he bought the needles at a local drugstore, telling the pharmacist he needed them for insulin.

"It was like shooting Jesus up in your arm," Brian said of his first IV injection. "It's like this white explosion of light in your head. You're floating on a cloud. You don't yet know that the first time is the best. After that, you're just chasing that first high."

Within six months, Brian had blown through the \$8,000 he'd put aside for college and pawned his Xbox and video games, all without his parents' knowledge. "I would spend six hours a day driving around Roanoke picking

up drugs, waiting for phone calls, going to ATMs.”

His parents noticed he was moodier than usual and worried about his weight loss; he'd dropped from 150 to 125 pounds. They asked him if he was anorexic.

A counselor he was seeing for anxiety set up an intervention of sorts in his office, inviting Brian's parents to attend and beginning with “Brian wants to tell you about a problem he's having.”

By then he was shooting up twenty bags a day, buying them from a host of user-dealers that had once included Spencer and Scott.

“I'm addicted to heroin,” he told his parents.

And while they were relieved to finally know why he'd lost so much weight—and why he sometimes stayed out until 3 or 4 a.m.—they were also gobsmacked.

They sent him to a local hospital to detox, then to intensive outpatient treatment, where he was prescribed the opioid-maintenance drug Suboxone, with mandatory urine screenings, one-on-one counseling, and support group meetings.

Brian was twenty-three years old and beginning to wean off Suboxone when I first interviewed him, in 2012.

“It's been seven days today” since his last dose of Suboxone, he said. “I have pinprickly skin, and I'm restless. It's hard to sit still.” Still mourning Scott's death, he noted that none of his other user-dealer friends, with the exception of Spencer, had been caught.

“The cellphone is the glue that holds it all together for the modern drug user,” Brian told me. “In high school, I snuck out of the house a number of times to meet people at the bottom of the driveway, and my parents had no clue. Aside from taking my cellphone away, my parents also could have looked at my text message logs and gotten a sense of what was going on.”

At a Lutheran church on the outskirts of Hidden Valley, two moms of opioid-addicted young men met at a Families Anonymous meeting, where worried parents go for peer support. Not only would their chance meeting have lasting implications for families of the addicted in the region, but their stories would also expose how families operate inside the sizable gaps that

have opened up between the two institutions tasked with addressing the opioid epidemic: the criminal justice and health care systems. While shame too often cloaks these gaps in secrecy, some doctors, drug dealers, and pharmaceutical companies continue to profit mightily from them. The addicted work to survive and stave off dopesickness while desperate family members and volunteers work to keep them alive.

Jamie Waldrop was a civic leader, the wife of a prominent surgeon. Drenna Banks and her husband ran a successful insurance agency. Their sons had been friends and used drugs together, crossing paths briefly through friends at North Cross, a private suburban school that Jamie's son Christopher attended.

"I just knew [Jamie] was this cool blond-haired chick who was making me laugh at a time when I needed to laugh," Drenna recalled. Jamie had not one but two children who'd become addicted, first to pills, then heroin. She hadn't realized the depth of their addiction until she found them both passed out in separate incidents in her home—her oldest, breathing but slumped over in a chair from a combo of Xanax and painkillers, his cellphone fallen to the ground; her youngest, passed out on the bathroom floor, heroin needles and blood sprawled around him.

Between the outpatient Suboxone programs (none of which worked, the family said) and multiple residential rehabs and aftercare sober-house programs (two of which, eventually, did), the Waldrops would spend more than \$300,000 on treatment—not counting the drug-related legal fees or the thousands in stolen checks and credit-card bills for gift cards, which were traded to dealers for drugs. (A \$200 gift card goes for \$120 worth of pills, Jamie explained.) "I was a pretty bad robber," Christopher, her youngest, said.

Jamie and her husband can't pinpoint the most frenzied moment in their journey. Maybe it was when they were scheduled to attend a medical conference at the Greenbrier, a storied five-star resort, but had to bring their grown sons along because they couldn't trust them to stay home alone. Before the conference was over, they discovered a sizable drug stash hidden in a potted plant in their room.

Maybe it was when Jamie's surgeon husband had to drive to the roughest part of the city to pay off one son's drug-dealer debt. Or maybe it was the daily jewelry shuffle Jamie initiated in the wake of discovering her diamond

necklace gone, along with her husband's Rolex: She'd take what remained of her best jewelry, "the handed-down stuff," and rotate it between an oatmeal container, the freezer, and the dirty-laundry hamper—the last places her children would look. "We lived like that for years; it was our new normal. Until they go off to rehab, you don't realize just how dysfunctional your life has become."

In the beginning, Jamie and Drenna had, like most parents, isolated themselves—until it dawned on them, at the Families Anonymous meeting, that they were living a very similar nightmare. "I stayed away from my other friends because what do you say when people ask you, 'How are your kids doing?'" Jamie said.

Christopher was two weeks into his first residential-treatment stay when word reached him that a good friend had fatally overdosed on 30-milligram oxycodone pills and other narcotics. It was Colton Banks, Drenna's son.

"It tore me up pretty good," Christopher remembered. "Colton was the nicest guy ever. You could call him up in the middle of the night and ask him for a ride, and he'd get out of bed and come and get you."

Christopher recognized the location of his friend's death immediately. His body was found at the home of a middle-aged man, an opioid addict who'd been prescribed hundreds of the pills from a Roanoke pain clinic three days before. All but twelve of the pills were missing, a police search warrant confirmed, in a painkiller-selling scheme that placed Colton, nineteen, on the campus of Radford University, where he was selling the pills to pay back a drug debt from the day before.

"We got most of our pills from him," Christopher said of the middle-aged addict. "He'd get four hundred thirties [Roxicodone], then some fifteens [Roxicodone], Xanax, and Klonopin all prescribed to him at once by the same crooked doctor. You can use a lot and still make five thousand dollars a month off that, if not more."

The weekend of Colton's death was supposed to be his last hurrah before getting clean. He had an appointment with an addiction specialist lined up for Monday—he'd stuck not one but two Post-it notes on the dashboard of his car reminding him to go.

Colton died at eleven-thirty on the morning of November 4, 2012, All Saints Sunday, while his parents were in church. A few hours later, when a policeman showed up on their stoop to say that Colton had “expired,” they were initially confused. Expired? No, their younger son was dead.

To add insult, no charges were filed against the middle-aged dealer, because it’s impossible to pin blame on a single batch of pills when an autopsy rules “multiple toxicity,” as it did in Colton’s case, the police chief confirmed.

The Bankses fumed, then and now, about that. “I want to go kill the bastard,” Drenna told her husband, but he persuaded her to stop and think about their other son.

And she did, though she sometimes sat outside the man’s house in her car, her gun on the seat next to her, anguishing and hating and praying for her son.

Two years before Colton’s death, a family friend in Fredericksburg, Virginia, lost his son to a heroin overdose, and Drenna remembered thinking, “Why can’t you control your kid?” She apologized, later, for having judged. She had monitored Colton’s Adderall when she learned he was abusing it at age seventeen. She’d grounded him soon after, when she found pot hidden in a briefcase under his bed. She’d sent him to a twenty-eight-day rehab at nineteen after he progressed to pills.

“At first you’re just so embarrassed,” Drenna said. “You think you’re doing right as a parent, but then these drugs take over their life, and nobody talks about it because it’s this dark, hidden secret.”

At the funeral-home visitation, Drenna had Colton presented in an open casket, wearing a flannel shirt she’d just bought him from Kohl’s, pants, hat, and his favorite boots, the ones he wore four-wheeling. His hands were arranged so they clutched a necklace he’d recently borrowed from his older brother, a silver fish medallion with the inscription WWJD.

She remembered her handsome bearded boy borrowing it from his brother’s nightstand, telling her, “I may not be as good-looking as Kevin, but I do pretty well with the girls.” And they both laughed.

She would remember that moment every day for the rest of her life—

especially when she stopped by Burger King on his birthday to order his favorite meal (a cheeseburger with fries and sweet tea), and when she poured dressing on her salad (“He’d use ranch, and he’d think the bottle had a small hole when it didn’t, and invariably it’d go all over the place”).

“I wanted his friends to see this person they knew who was no longer here. This was the star athlete, the kid who stood up to bullies. Colton was everybody’s protector, everybody’s friend. He had a good home life. He really had it all,” she recalled, tearing up.

“They think they’re invincible.”

Three months after Spencer left for prison and two years after Scott Roth’s death, the Bankses used their nineteen-year-old son’s funeral to send a message to his opioid-addicted friends and their parents.

Though Christopher Waldrop was away at rehab and not allowed to come home, Jamie made a point of sitting next to one of his high school friends at the service, in an increasingly familiar role.

She and a handful of other local moms were preparing to out themselves and their families, understanding, finally, that survival had to trump shame. Jamie pledged to help her son’s friend find a bed at a treatment facility the moment he was ready to go. “His parents were in total denial,” she said.

She would tell Christopher later how Drenna Banks stood at her son’s funeral, her voice quavering, and begged her audience to let Colton’s death be the last:

“For the longest time, I didn’t know what God wanted me to do, but now I know,” she told the mourners, chucking her prepared remarks in favor of an impromptu call for treatment. “There are so many families struggling with the same thing Colton has been struggling with. It’s insidious, and it’s evil, and it’s not just pot....And I know there’s a social stigma attached to this, but don’t hide. Don’t hide from it.

“I know there are at least three other boys here that I know Colton wants me to help. And you know who you are....I know now that I’m supposed to be here for you boys, and we’re gonna make it through.”

The following Mother’s Day, Jamie called Drenna and asked her to come over because her husband was out of the country, and she didn’t know what

else to do. Christopher was close to relapsing, Jamie suspected, if he hadn't already. He was at home visiting her, having checked himself out of an Asheville, North Carolina, aftercare program—against his counselor's advice. After four months of sobriety, "I was tired of all the rules," Christopher told me later. "I wanted to drink again."

Jamie begged Drenna to talk some sense into her son. And Drenna tried, telling him that Colton would not want him to be using again; that it wasn't fair for his mom to have to wonder every second of every day if she would be going to his funeral as she did Colton's. He insisted that he wasn't using heroin and that he hoped, eventually, to make Colton proud.

But the drinking would lead to poor choices, as it usually did, and before long the usual signs presented themselves in the form of stolen checks and pawned laptops; in Christopher continuing to lie through his teeth to his mom, over the phone from Asheville, that he was not doing drugs.

Drenna advised Jamie to drive the four hours to her son's apartment and show up on his doorstep, unannounced. "You've got to go down there," she implored her friend. "You've got to go look at him and pull up his sleeves!"

Jamie arrived at her son's apartment to find cases of beer and a bong in the middle of the living room.

"Hand me your phone," she said.

Her stomach sank the moment she clicked on his text log and found scores of messages to and from drug dealers. There was no need to pull up Christopher's sleeves—the needles and bags of heroin were right there near the beer, tucked into his shoes.

"I was like, shit, here we go again," Christopher remembered.

What he needed, said his counselor, whom Jamie had called in for advice, was "another fucking spiritual experience, and I have the perfect place": an abstinence-based rehab in the Montana wilderness.

"I'm not going anywhere," said Christopher. "I hate the wilderness."

"Then you can join the Asheville transient society," the counselor said.

Christopher pleaded for help from his mom. Surely she could not abide him becoming homeless.

But Jamie said she would no longer help Christopher finance an

apartment, a car, a cellphone, or even food. “We’re not enabling you anymore,” she said.

Instead, she spent a week in an Asheville hotel room with her dopesick son as he detoxed, toggling between a hot shower and the toilet, prepping for his return to rehab.

A day into the detox, Christopher decided he was ready for another fucking spiritual experience. He was twenty years old.

“I felt terrible,” he remembered. “From Colton dying, and I knew I’d hurt my family a ton.” He was tired of trawling for purses in mall parking lots when most of the car doors were locked. “I was not having enough money to get high, I’d been stealing too much, and I hated it. This time, I wanted it [sobriety] for myself.”

As of this writing, Christopher has remained sober four years. At twenty-four, he’s back in college, this time in Dallas, the city where he landed after Montana to live in a sober house for young men transitioning from rehab to recovery. Offered a drink on his twenty-first birthday, Christopher told a waitress, “I’m allergic to alcohol.”

He was spending a lot of time “giving back” to the recovery community, mentoring young people who are newly sober, helping them work the twelve steps—and worrying about his mom as she increasingly devoted herself to helping other addicted people access treatment, calling rehabs, picking them up off the streets, and taking them to homeless shelters. His surgeon dad has even been known to give Jamie’s cellphone number out to addicted patients he meets in the ER.

“There’s a lot of emotional investment in it for her, but she’s not an addict and doesn’t totally understand, still, that some of the people she deals with are going to die. And the small percentage of people who do end up getting better may end up” relapsing, Christopher said, especially those who can’t afford multiple rehabs and aftercare.

How many addicts, after all, have moms who can afford not just to send their dopesick son to a second \$30,000 rehab but also to accompany him on his flight to Montana so he won’t, at the last minute, back out?

Christopher knows he’s in a rarefied position: Fewer than one-quarter of heroin addicts who receive abstinence-only counseling and support remain clean two or more years. The recovery rate is higher, roughly 40 to 60 percent, among those who get counseling, support group, *and* medication-

assisted treatment such as methadone, buprenorphine, or naltrexone.

“We know from other countries that when people stick with treatment, outcomes can be even better than fifty percent,” Lembke, the addiction specialist, told me. But most people in the United States don’t have access to good opioid-addiction treatment, she said, acknowledging the plethora of cash-only MAT clinics that resemble pill-mill pain clinics as well as rehabs that remain staunchly anti-MAT.

All told, Christopher had lost four close friends to opioid overdose, including Colton Banks and Scott Roth. For Brian, the number was also four.

None of the recovering users I interviewed had been in the military, but they tallied their losses with the sorrowful stoicism of veterans who’d been to war.

Near the tail end of Spencer Mumpower’s prison sentence, he had lost twelve friends, and five others were now in prison or jail. “He’s had very few friends get clean, either through going to rehab or jail, but the ones who didn’t are either dead, or they have parents who enable them, and they continue to do drugs,” Ginger Mumpower said. “Most of his friends have never seen jail; they either talk their way out, or their parents buy their way out.”

When Colton Banks died, in 2012, for every one opioid-overdose death, there were 130 opioid-dependent Americans who were still out there, still using the drugs.



George's Chicken, Edinburg, Virginia

Chapter Seven

FUBI

In the picturesque Shenandoah Valley town of Woodstock, more than two hours north of Roanoke, bulk heroin cut in a Harlem lab had just made its way down I-81. It was the last thing Shenandoah County sergeant Brent

Lutz, a Woodstock native, would have expected to find himself doing: stalking a major heroin dealer. But here he was, at all hours of the day and night, clutching a pair of binoculars while crouched in the upstairs bedroom of his cousin's house a few miles outside of town. He'd spent so much time there in recent days that the mile-wide stench of chicken entrails coming from George's Chicken across the road no longer bothered him.

Lutz was tracking the movements of Charles Smith and Pete Butler, suspected dealers in a newly arrived drug ring. Butler lived in a marigold-colored boardinghouse called Alma's, full of chicken-processing-plant employees, while Smith lived in a trailer park with his girlfriend behind the giant plant. Confidential informants had told Lutz that the men, former drug offenders who'd landed in town a year earlier to work at the plant via the Virginia prison system's work-release program, were responsible for the recent surge in heroin-related crime in Shenandoah County. Not only did Smith and Butler have dozens of people working under them, many of them addicted, they also had a boss.

Over the next year, the story of that boss and his underlings would allow the young sergeant and his peers to pull the curtain back on the inner workings of a large-scale heroin ring for the first time.

Across the nation, police chiefs and sheriffs were beginning to lament, "We can't arrest our way out of this epidemic." That sentiment illuminated the folly of the decades-long War on Drugs, in which drug users are arrested four times more often than those who sell the drugs.

Sergeant Lutz's government-financed odyssey would also illustrate just how expensive, difficult, and time-consuming enforcement strategies are—with \$7.6 billion spent nationwide combating opioid-related crime in 2013 alone—compared with treating the addicted people who drive the demand.

It was late 2012, and Lutz, thirty, had just returned to his job as lead narcotics investigator from a temporary assignment elsewhere in the sheriff's department. Before he left, drug arrests in Woodstock, the county seat, were mostly related to black-market opioid pills: Roxicodone, or Roxy; Dilaudid; Percocet; and the like. His mother, a pharmacy assistant in the storied uptown drugstore with turquoise soda fountain counters and a

handwritten charge-account ledger like something out of *Happy Days*, had first warned him about pill abuse more than a decade before, sharing stories of customers who claimed they'd accidentally spilled their prescription down the bathroom sink. The local emergency room was by now accustomed to the classic fake and fraud: a moaning patient claiming kidney stone pain and pleading for Dilaudid, also known as "that one that starts with a D." Drug-seeking behavior was so common that it had spawned an *Onion*-style medical parody on a website called GomerBlog, which punchy health care workers across the state had gleefully called to my attention: "To kick off their new labeling, [the Dilaudid-making] company hopes to change the pain scale from a 0–10 to Tylenol-to–That One That Starts with a D," the satirist wrote. ("You go crazy if you can't laugh every now and then," a nurse-practitioner told me.)

Farther out, in the foothills of the George Washington National Forest, people were still making methamphetamine, Lutz knew. In 2008, he had worked a notorious case, arresting some twenty locals and diversion-program inmates for smuggling meth-making materials out of George's Chicken via an elaborate pulley system dangling from the plant's roof.

Lutz thought he had seen everything at George's Chicken, a plant manned by dislocated factory workers, young locals who lived just north of the poverty line, immigrants who'd managed to land a work visa (or a passable version of one), and an increasing number of workers whom Lutz referred to simply as "diversion," as in: "Most of the trouble we get around here is from diversion." A Virginia Department of Corrections initiative, the program aims to divert nonviolent felons from prison to employment, and to help them gain work experience that will ease the transition back to their communities after their sentences are complete. Most divertees hail from the urban centers of Roanoke, Richmond, and the Tidewater region, or outside Washington.

Lutz had met with managers at George's Chicken numerous times. "We're out there once a week at least—fights, drug-related stuff, overdoses in the company parking lot," the sergeant said. "You ask them if they drug-test, and they say they do, but I doubt they watch 'em, so they can still bring in [clean] urine. As long as they got people coming and going to work, they don't care."

Lutz's boss, Shenandoah County sheriff Tim Carter, told me the

Department of Corrections was equally lax. “They put these people in this program, but they don’t put the resources to monitor them,” he said. A local probation officer, one of two overseeing the diversion workers at George’s, told me she was lucky to check in with them once a month. Among the divertees who stay after their sentences are complete, “very few of them earn enough money on their own to make expenses. So, they either commit new crimes, or they decide to give up and return back home. Or they abscond. They run.”

The plant had become such a sore point among local police that Lutz and his colleagues joked: “Forget building a Mexican border wall. What they should really build is a wall around George’s Chicken.”

But the arrival of bulk heroin in Woodstock was more proof that borders were impotent in the face of the drug. The weed-killer Roundup may cure your front yard of crabgrass, but if your next-door neighbor’s lawn is infested with it, those weeds will eventually creep back into your turf.

During the six months Lutz was away from his usual drug beat, heroin exploded in his tiny, bucolic community—three people died of overdose, and the hospital would soon report its first opioid-dependent baby. “How it transformed from a pill problem to a heroin problem here, it was like cutting off and on a light switch,” Lutz recalled.

Local deputies had yet to identify the supplier of the dope. But an informant helped them zero in on people close to the dealer, including Smith and Butler, who were the eyes and ears of a major heroin supplier Lutz knew only by his nickname: D.C.

In late 2012, D.C. was more rumor than reality, a malignant but murky force. A few counties to the east, an associate of D.C.’s selling heroin in Stafford County went by the nicknames Sunny and New York. In between the new heroin hot spots, local police were also noticing a spike in drug arrests and shoplifting.

Lutz called in federal reinforcements when he heard that D.C., whoever he was, was in the habit of demanding sex from female addicts before he’d sell them their dope. Informants said at least one was a teenager. Lutz was also beginning to see former classmates hijacked by the drug—farmer’s

kids, football stars, many of them still managing, somehow, to get up and go to work. One woman he knew was in the habit of kissing her husband goodbye in the morning, putting her kids on the school bus, then driving to Baltimore to buy enough to last the day before returning to Woodstock just as the school bus brought her kids home.

Though Lutz had made his first undercover heroin buy in 2010—at a price twice the current going rate—Woodstock was now, three years later, beginning to fall prey to what economists would label the diseases of despair. Whereas central Appalachian communities like Lee County—victims of factory and coal-mine shutdowns, followed by skyrocketing disability claims that made them prime sales targets for Big Pharma—had been battling opioid addiction since OxyContin’s 1996 release, Woodstock and similar small towns were slower to experience deaths related to opioid addiction, alcohol-related liver disease, and suicide. They seemed to be somewhat shielded because their economies, while not exactly robust, had maintained a centuries-old agricultural base and were never dominated by a single industry or two like so many smaller Appalachian counties where pill abuse first took root.

“The places with the lowest overdose mortality rates tend to be in farming-dependent counties” with a more diversified economy, said Shannon Monnat, a Syracuse University professor. She likened Woodstock to her hometown of Lowville, New York, a village near the Adirondacks that’s economically dependent on dairy farming, wood products, and a wind farm that generates about \$3.5 million a year for the local school district.

Compared with Lee County at the western tip of Virginia, Woodstock and other rural communities like it displayed far better indicators of health: Fewer residents smoked, fewer were uninsured, and drug-related mortality rates were much lower than in places where single, labor-heavy industries like coal and furniture once dominated.

More significantly: The opioid-prescribing rate in the Woodstock region was almost half the state’s rate—and less than one-third the rate of opioid prescriptions in the coalfield counties. On average, every person enrolled in Medicare Part D in Lee County had been handed a whopping 10.23 opioid prescriptions in 2013, compared with just 2.96 in Shenandoah County.

As the epidemic spread from rural enclaves to cities and suburbs in the early aughts, police in Monnat’s upstate New York hometown began seeing

the same trends as Sergeant Lutz: “They were saying, ‘It’s coming, we see traces, but it isn’t yet here,’” she said. “That doesn’t mean people weren’t self-medicating in other ways. It’s just that alcohol doesn’t kill you instantly like heroin and fentanyl can.”

As journalist Sam Quinones theorized in his 2015 book, *Dreamland*, maybe the addiction-prone people who would have succumbed to alcohol addiction in late middle age—had opiates not appeared—were the same people who were now prematurely dying of heroin in their early adulthood.

Monnat’s deep dive into rural wellness data underscored that hunch: Binge-drinking rates in the northern Shenandoah Valley were roughly the same, even a little higher, than rates for rural dwellers living in the nation’s most distressed counties and towns. But people in their late teens and twenties didn’t often die from booze.

The real perfect storm fueling the opioid epidemic had been the collapse of work, followed by the rise in disability and its parallel, pernicious twin: the flood of painkillers pushed by rapacious pharma companies and regulators who approved one opioid pill after another. Declining workforce participation wasn’t just a rural problem anymore; it was everywhere, albeit to a lesser degree in areas with physicians who prescribed fewer opioids and higher rates of college graduates. As Monnat put it: “When work no longer becomes an option for people, what you have at the base is a structural problem, where the American dream becomes a scam.”

She likened the epidemic’s spread not to crabgrass but to a wildfire: “If the economic collapse was the kindling in this epidemic, the opiates were the spark that lit the fire.”

And the helicopters were nowhere in sight.

By the spring of 2013, Lutz still didn’t know D.C.’s real name or what he looked like. But he had pieced together an impressive dossier of details: D.C. was African American, in his midthirties, with no tattoos. He drove a silver, older-model Mercedes SUV, nice but not too flashy, no custom rims. His heroin was said to enter Virginia’s I-81 corridor in plastic Walmart bags, tucked inside snack containers carried by young women riding the Chinatown bus from New York, earning \$300 to \$500 per round trip.

Packaged in Harlem, the heroin was shaped into uniform, four-ounce hockey-puck-shaped disks that nestled snugly inside a Pringle's can. Whoever was coordinating the production seemed to have a craving for a single flavor, cheddar cheese. And they were methodical, emptying the cans, then repacking them with four pucks and stacking a few Pringles at the end before resealing the tubes with a hot-glue gun. The mystery source also seemed to crave Nilla Wafers and Pepperidge Farm chocolate chip cookies, using those empty packages to transport powder cocaine, which Butler and Smith cooked into crack, Lutz later learned.

An ex-offender who had long dealt in crack and marijuana, D.C. at first had no idea what to do with the Pringles pucks when they landed in Woodstock. So he hired Smith and Butler to break them down into dosage-sized units, or tenths of a gram. In fact, D.C. was so afraid of the drug that he wore rubber gloves, goggles, and a face mask while Smith and Butler cut and packaged the heroin into bags, called points or tenths—on the other side of his living room.

“He looked like he was doing surgery,” one of his subordinate dealers told me. “He was way too scared of heroin to ever use it.” Like many black heroin users and dealers, D.C. pronounced his product “*herr-on*,” as in: *None of my friends or close associates does herr-on. I wouldn't even know where to put the needle.*

But from the first moment he sent one of his subordinate dealers out in Woodstock to sell a gram's worth of heroin he'd paid \$65 for in Harlem—and the dealer returned with \$800 in cash—D.C. was hooked on another drug.

“What you sell up in the city, you can double down [your profits] here,” said an investigator on the case. “You don't have the competition in the small towns, and you don't have people shooting at you.”

Whereas commuter dealers running to Baltimore were bringing in 20 grams—at most—D.C.'s Pringles haul routinely contained 200 grams.

Lutz crouched beneath the window, waiting for the Mercedes and thinking about his fiancée back home, still pissed that he'd been called out to work on Christmas Day. At a family wedding in Florida, he'd spent most of his

time on his cellphone, monitoring an investigation of the latest overdose. When his cellphone rang at night, his fiancée's kids moaned loudly about him leaving, again, for work. As the county's point man for drug activity, he was now getting, on average, one phone call a night.

Ever since the 2010 reformulation of OxyContin, Lutz had been tracking a small cluster of heroin users, most of them young white men who made the two-hour drive to Baltimore, a longtime heroin stronghold, on a near-daily basis. They'd buy enough to use, plus extra to sell to friends, making enough to fund both their next fix and gas for the trip to get the fix after that. Police classified them as commuter-dealers, and they were becoming an important subset of the drug trade in Baltimore, where heroin sales were estimated at \$1.5 million every day.

For forty years, Baltimore had been a prime staging area for dealers moving drugs, especially heroin, along the East Coast. Its port was an entryway for international drug smuggling. Another trafficking artery was Interstate 95, which connected Baltimore to cities from Miami to Bangor, Maine, with nicknames that transitioned over time, depending on the drug of choice, from Reefer Express to Cocaine Lane to the Heroin Highway, also called the Highway to Hell.

With the highest per capita rate of heroin use in the country, Baltimore residents were six times more likely to die from an opioid overdose than the national average.

Commuter-dealers weren't making the trek just from Woodstock but from nearby towns, too, including Martinsburg, West Virginia, and Hagerstown, Maryland, localities that would both earn the nickname Little Baltimore for their explosions in heroin-overdose deaths. A 2017 *New Yorker* profile of Martinsburg by Margaret Talbot opened with the synchronous thud of two Little League parents who had fallen from the bleachers after overdosing at their daughter's softball practice, their younger children running around and frantically screaming, "Wake up! Wake up!"

Twentysomething Roanokers were drawing on drug-dealing connections for their daylong northern treks up I-81 to New Jersey and New York. But in

wide-open Baltimore, commuter-dealers needed no such connection.

When Shenandoah County native Dennis Painter made his first trip to Baltimore to buy heroin, in 2012, he'd been advised simply to look for the blinking blue lights. Intended to aid police surveillance of high-crime neighborhoods, the lights also functioned as beacons for drug seekers with out-of-state plates. "Sometimes the dealers will flash their lights at you when they see your plates, it's just crazy," he explained in a phone interview from a Nashville rehab facility in 2016.

"Then, once you know somebody [to buy from], you just keep going back. And when the police arrest someone, there are four more people waiting to take that person's place."

Dennis usually drove to Baltimore with his best friend, Jesse Bolstridge, Kristi's son. Sometimes the pair stopped by the city health department's syringe-exchange van to pick up clean needles. Once when Jesse was away at rehab, Dennis made the trek to Baltimore with friends of friends, only to be robbed and ultimately abandoned by the people in his car pool. His girlfriend had to pick him up late that night, fuming, their toddler twins asleep in the back seat.

Jesse and Dennis had been best friends since they were toddlers—"I have pictures of us together as three-year-olds playing in a sandbox," Dennis told me. They'd been partying together since the age of sixteen, when Jesse began trading his ADHD medication for painkillers.

Whereas at the start of D.C.'s heroin ring in late 2012, Jesse still preferred injecting crushed-up Roxys, Dennis said, his friend's drug of choice soon became IV heroin, because it was cheaper and stronger, and suddenly it had become much easier to get. As their cravings grew in 2013, their parents paid for them to get residential treatment in separate out-of-state facilities, only to watch them fall back into using shortly after they returned and reunited. The first time Jesse shot up heroin, his mother told me, it was with drugs Dennis bought from one of D.C.'s subdealers.

Police officers and prosecutors working the case told me they could count on one hand the number of heroin users in the region before D.C. arrived. But Dennis and others familiar with heroin in Woodstock contend there were more. Dozens of young twentysomethings from Woodstock had already been driving to Baltimore to buy heroin, some making the trip twice a day.

One night in late March 2013, Sergeant Lutz got a lucky break from an unlikely source—a minor traffic stop in neighboring Middletown (population 1,320). A traffic cop had pulled over the driver of a 2008 Hyundai Elantra for a broken license-plate light and smelled marijuana wafting from his car.

The moment the officer returned to his cruiser, Devon Gray floored the Hyundai—before the policeman could piece together that Gray was driving on a suspended license or that he was an armed career criminal who went by the street name D, with several felonies on his record, including multiple convictions for assault and battery, smuggling drugs into a prison, and felony cocaine trafficking. In the course of Gray’s forty-two years, his only legitimate employment, police later learned, had been a stint at George’s Chicken that ended a few months before. And he was one of D.C.’s and New York’s key distributors.

Neither did the Middletown cop know that Bill Metcalf, an agent for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, had already been pursuing Gray for the past three weeks, arranging undercover buys from him in the parking lots of Pizza Hut, Target, 7-Eleven, and Petco in several northern Shenandoah Valley towns. (During the Petco buy, Gray had ridden shotgun with a girlfriend who had her two-year-old in the back seat.) Metcalf surreptitiously captured the buys on video from his vehicle and supplemented the visual record with an audio wire he’d tucked into the clothes of his confidential informant. Metcalf had been called into the case a month earlier by a detective buddy in Front Royal, a half hour east of Woodstock, who explained that Gray was carrying guns, in violation of his probation terms.

Lutz had teamed with Metcalf before on cases and admired his ability to work all night and keep going the next day. “ATF agents are the street cops of the federal world; they’re a different breed and very much more gung ho than we’re allowed to be,” Lutz told me in early 2016. “The [Obama] administration is trying to rein ’em in a little; if there aren’t guns connected to a case, they want ’em to pull back. But ATF agents want to work. They’re like, ‘Call us, call us, call us.’”

Every officer and prosecutor involved in the sprawling D.C.

investigation used the same word to describe Metcalf: “relentless.” Frequently they used the same phrase: “He can be a pain in the ass.” “We’ve almost come to blows a couple times,” said Sergeant Kevin Coffman, the Front Royal officer who alerted Metcalf to Gray’s guns.

The two cars screamed as fast as ninety miles an hour. Gray led the local officer on a squealing chase through Middletown, a one-stoplight hamlet, down a scenic byway across I-81, and into neighboring Strasburg. On the southern edge of Strasburg, Gray abruptly stomped his brakes, causing the cruiser to ram the tail of the Hyundai and veer into an embankment before skidding and coming to rest on its side. The wreck left the officer with minor injuries. His police dog, a black Lab named Trooper, broke loose and ran frantically around the totaled car, his training toys strewn across the street.

While the officer extricated himself from the vehicle, Gray drove away, then abandoned his Hyundai and took off on foot—less than a mile from the field where Jesse Bolstridge had made his hometown football fans stand and roar.

The case was sprouting new tentacles by the day. As it stretched across state and county lines, Metcalf called in a federal prosecutor from Roanoke who specialized in heroin cases, and a grand jury was eventually convened. The prosecutor’s Obama-era marching orders, according to a road map written by then-attorney general Eric H. Holder Jr., was to use discretion in filing criminal charges, reserving the harshest penalties for serious, high-level, and/or violent drug traffickers. Responding to a nearly sixfold increase in the national prison population between 1972 and 2008, Holder wrote: “Too many Americans go to too many prisons for far too long and for truly no good law enforcement reason.”

This case seemed to fit all the criteria. It targeted the biggest dealers.

But to get the worst offenders off the streets, investigators typically need witnesses in the form of user-dealers. It’s a messy and often dangerous business, in which police try to glean evidence and witness testimony from

lower-level offenders in exchange for what's called substantial assistance. The unofficial interviews are not typically part of the public record, giving prosecutors and law enforcement officers alike a great deal of discretion over which witnesses to believe and which to target for the harshest punishment.

With a fugitive hit-and-run now among his list of offenses, Gray was definitely in the mid-level category. The day after the high-speed chase, he reached out from his hideout—in a tiny town near the base of Shenandoah Mountain—to the same informant Metcalf used for the earlier drug buys. Gray was desperate to buy a gun. (On the day of the chase, he had left the house without his usual complement of weaponry.) Metcalf was eager to do the undercover deal.

Within a week, a new setup was arranged to focus on Gray, a Florida native with a history of evading police. Metcalf arranged to meet Gray and trade him a gun for heroin. The deal would take place in a local storage facility, a public space with long rows of buildings and surrounding fences—easy to surround at a moment's notice by throngs of federal and local police.

“My story was, I was recently out of jail and cleaning out my storage bin,” Metcalf recalled. “I had some guns there, and I was trying to get back on my feet by trading guns for dope.”

A stocky guy with graying temples and piercing eyes, Metcalf grew out his trim beard for the occasion and wore a wire to capture the quick exchange. As soon as it was finished and Metcalf walked away, federal agents swarmed in to place Gray under arrest.

From the moment he was in handcuffs, he cooperated with authorities.

“I can give you the name of the guy who controls everything,” Gray offered, according to Metcalf and other officers working the case.

It was a huge moment, albeit a messy one, relying as it usually did on joining forces with one criminal to nab another. “In the end, they all sing” is how Metcalf told the story. But desperate people often lied to reduce their prison time, and there were a lot of people crooning some discordant, self-interested tunes.

He went by the nickname D.C., Gray told Metcalf, but his real name was Ronnie Jones.

While Jones controlled the heroin supply in the northern Shenandoah Valley, Metcalf would later learn, Kareem Shaw—aka New York—controlled the supply east toward the northern Virginia bedroom communities closer to Washington. Their dope was Mexican, trafficked by a Dominican dealer who ran a lab somewhere in Harlem.

Agent Metcalf and Sergeant Lutz now knew not only D.C.'s name but also where he lived—in a low-income apartment on the outskirts of Woodstock. His drug ring trafficked in seven counties, and federal authorities were on their way to proving he was the largest heroin trafficker along Virginia's I-81 corridor and possibly in the state. In the small towns that dotted the region, Jones's business model was wholly new. "When you get someone like Ronnie coming in here with real weight, that's far beyond a bunch of users piling into a car to go to Baltimore for the day," Metcalf said.

But a black man in an almost entirely white town driving a Mercedes SUV, even if it wasn't flashy? That was harder to camouflage than the smell of the chicken plant.

"When big dealers come into small towns, they don't last long, because they get talked about a lot," said Don Wolthuis, the assistant U.S. attorney who directed the prosecution of the case. Not much time elapses before their customers become involved with police, who catch the addicted users stealing stuff—or robbing banks—to afford their next buy. "They get dined out quick," he said.

"The drug dealer's dilemma is always: How do I market myself and remain invisible simultaneously?"

Metcalf alerted Lutz to Jones's identity, only to learn that Lutz had just identified him through another George's Chicken diversion worker, Logan "Low" Rose, who sold Jones's heroin from a Honda Civic with gold rims that really did stand out. He had been Jones's "stick man," or driver, on occasions when he couldn't find a mule and had to personally replenish his Harlem supply. Jones wasn't allowed to leave the state without his probation officer's permission.

Before Lutz could move in for the arrest, Rose fled to his native Puerto Rico, where federal marshals caught up with him a few days later. They found him sitting on a wall in front of his mother's tiny shack, eating a bowl of cereal.

When the marshals phoned with news of Rose's arrest, Lutz was stunned. "We're like, 'Puerto Rico? You're kidding me. But that's so far away!'"

It was so far away, in fact, that Rose had forgotten it was a territory of the United States, complete with its own federal law enforcement offices.

While Brent Lutz was memorizing Jones's driver's-license photo and Bill Metcalf was learning about his gun—a Taurus .357 revolver, nicknamed the Decapitator—Ronnie "D.C." Jones confided in his neighbor, Marie, one of his user-dealers and one of the many women with whom he kept company. When Jones or his runners went to New York to resupply, Marie later told investigators, "two hundred people I know of would get sick [go into withdrawals]. They could not wait for Jones to get back, and when he got back, everybody was better."

"You can't blame Ronnie for everything," Marie told me. "We're the ones who stuck the needle in our arms. But we didn't have heroin available to buy here in town till Ronnie came. What he did ruined a lot of people's lives," she said, ticking off a long list of names.

By importing heroin to a small town in bulk, Jones was able to make twice what the dealers in Baltimore and other cities were making. He made so much that he stockpiled new clothes in his new apartment, discarding them after a single wearing. He had a security system installed so that when he opened his front door, a woman's chipper recorded voice intoned, "Front door. Open." He kept a personal trainer on call for workouts. He hired a designer to create a logo for an all-natural skin-care line he hoped to sell. He wore gold chains, outfitted his girlfriends in new clothes—one kept her own stacks of new Lucky jeans in his apartment—and told people he followed the motto of rapper Biggie Smalls: "Never get high on your own supply."

As the task force charted out Jones's ring, pinning photographs on police

department walls, with street names to keep everybody straight, Metcalf turned to Lutz. The goal before had always been to stop the small-town dealers. This case was larger and more complex than any conspiracy they'd worked before. Maybe it was possible this time, even, to bring down the source.

"Man, this reminds me of *The Wire*," Metcalf said.

Lutz hadn't heard of the show. But watching it later with his fiancée, he agreed. Thinking about the exponential scope of Jones's impact—a trail of addiction that would not be contained, in all likelihood, for many years—both men seethed. "We were starting to have eighteen-year-olds overdose," Lutz remembered. "We were disgusted with what he was doing to our town." Before 2013 was over, overdose deaths in the region would surge to twenty-one, up from a single death in 2012.

Heroin was so wildly lucrative that even mid-level dealers in the ring could make \$15,000 in a single weekend. Metcalf and Lutz interviewed an addicted user-dealer from Stafford County, thirty-one-year-old Kimberle Hodsden, who was dating Kareem Shaw and going on regular trips with him to Harlem to test the potency of the heroin before he bought it. On one trip, Shaw got mad at Hodsden when she declined his initial offer to buy her a \$400 pair of pants from a swanky Manhattan store. It was heady stuff for a local girl, a high school dropout who'd been shuffled among her mother, grandmother, and a local shelter.

Hodsden's name and picture were pinned halfway down the growing chart, the words "Crash Test Dummy"—Shaw's pet name for her—inked beneath her mug shot. And Hodsden had a tiny clue about the New York supplier to share: He went by the nickname Mack.

Jones controlled the left, or western, side of the chart while Shaw's name went on the eastern side of the ring, on the right. Low-level informants dealing only to support their habit were at the bottom of the pyramid, including some whose names would eventually get crossed out due to overdose death.

The chart eventually earned an unusual nickname, thanks to an interview between Metcalf and one of Shaw's lieutenants, Keith Marshall, in jail for possession of illicit pills. Addicted to opioids since the age of sixteen, Marshall was a functioning heroin addict from Baltimore who'd managed to keep a job for fifteen years—as a worker for Payne's Tree Service in

Stafford—before getting ensnared in the Jones/Shaw ring. His lawyer told me he'd overdosed five times, and had been in and out of jail for petty theft and possession charges most of his adult life.

In a letter from a North Carolina prison, Marshall himself wrote: "I've done tree work, tended bar, did graphic design for a studio up in Manhattan, among other jobs. I've had 20 grand stashed in my house for the re-up, and I've lived in a tent in the woods because I was so far gone on dope."

Scheduled to be jailed on possession charges in mid-2013 (stemming from an earlier state charge), Marshall said he returned to dealing because he wanted to make extra money in preparation for going to jail. He had debts to pay off, and he wanted to have money on his jail account for toiletries and food. "He started dealing for Kareem Shaw to take care of business, before he went away for a year" for the possession conviction, his lawyer, Dana Cormier, said. "Jones and Shaw were living the life, but almost everyone underneath them, Keith Marshall included, were junkies distributing just to supply their own habit."

Metcalf waited until Marshall went to jail for the 2013 state charges to interview him, carefully, about his role in Shaw's network. "You don't want to reveal too much of your case," Metcalf explained. "You just wanna poke around and see if they'll talk."

But Marshall refused, steadfastly and defiantly.

"Guys, I could've given you the biggest dealer supplying Stafford County, but I'm not giving you shit," Marshall told him.

Already surveilling Marshall's dealer, Kareem Shaw, now operating out of cheap motels along Route 11, Metcalf was fishing, trying to see if Marshall knew anything that would help him peel another layer from the onion, maybe a detail about the New York source. He challenged Marshall to tell him everything he knew, but Marshall refused.

"What if we have proof you're already involved [in the federal case], and we come back here with a warrant?" Metcalf challenged.

Marshall was sure Metcalf was bluffing, convinced he would have already indicted him if he had the evidence, Marshall later told me from prison. "Mr. Metcalf unfortunately is a man of his word," he said, referring to the additional federal distribution charges Metcalf returned with six months later, which resulted in another sentence for five years.

But at the time, Marshall leveled a cold stare at his interviewer and

ended the conversation with a clipped “Fuck. You. Bring it.”

Back at the prosecutor’s office, Wolhuis now had a name for the worst drug ring in the region’s history. Above his chart, topped with the names of Ronnie Jones and Kareem Shaw, he took out a Sharpie and wrote in black capital letters: FUBI.

“It just resonated,” he said.

OceanofPDF.com



Jesse Bolstridge's grave, Strasburg, Virginia

Chapter Eight

"Shit Don't Stop"

The Ronnie Jones arrest, when it finally came in June 2013, was almost anticlimactic. Poetic, just about, the way it featured the usual cascade of drug-bust interactions: an informant tip, followed by a recorded buy that led

to one of Jones's main subdealers, a former Marine who'd been kicked out of the Corps for alcohol-related charges before spiraling into heroin addiction. In the end, all Bill Metcalf had to do was track the movements of Joshua Pettyjohn, the ex-Marine, as he bought 20 grams of heroin from Jones and then drove away. Pettyjohn would warble a detailed tune, confessing immediately after police arrested him in possession of heroin.

Jones had known he was "hot," a police target. A month earlier, Brent Lutz and other task force officers swooped in on his Woodstock apartment complex on Lakeview Drive, only to find that he'd decamped to one of the two other apartments he was also keeping, one with a girlfriend in Dumfries and the other in Front Royal, closer to Kareem Shaw. He drove a decidedly less flashy Chevy Impala when he drove to Woodstock, reserving the Mercedes for nondope activities. Police called the Front Royal apartment they'd been surveilling—a vinyl-sided three-floor unit just off Main Street—the man cave. They suspected it was where the Pringles pucks were now being "re-rocked," or broken down.

To lower his profile even more, Jones changed cellphone numbers and started parking several blocks away from his apartments. He also transitioned his operation from a "brew-thru," as Don Wolthuis called it—selling at his apartment, to just about any buyer who showed up—to dealing only with a handful of subdealers. He was trying to distance himself from his buyers and therefore, he hoped, from arrest.

At the Lakeview raid, Lutz and his colleagues arrested Marie instead, along with four others near the bottom of the FUBI chart. Marie spent seven months in the county jail on charges of heroin possession, a probation violation from an earlier, Suboxone-distribution charge, and child endangerment. "My daughter, she's seven now, and she still has bad dreams about the night the cops kicked in our door," she told me in 2016.

"We spooked him," Lutz recalled of Jones.

Jones had been so positive that Marie would sing that his expression barely changed six weeks later, when more than two dozen state, federal, and local officers descended to place him under arrest. Lutz would never forget the moment he first eyed, through binoculars from the Chinese restaurant next door, the guy whose picture he'd fixated on for months. "He had the look like he wasn't surprised," Lutz said, an assessment Marie echoed when she remembered Jones telling her months before: "If I have a

good run, it'll last three months. If I have a great run, I can make it six.”

Jones had been bringing bulk heroin to Woodstock for exactly six months. During that time, not only had overdose deaths surged but so had nonfatal overdoses, the number of children entering foster care due to parental opioid abuse, and the cases of children born with neonatal abstinence syndrome—all at roughly five times the previous year’s rate.

Once they had Jones in handcuffs, Metcalf wanted to pounce; he gathered as much evidence as possible from Jones’s apartments before word of his arrest reached the other dealers in the ring. The day was filled with hurry up and wait—too much waiting and not enough hurrying, in Metcalf’s view—as search warrant requests slogged their way out to local judges in several localities for everything from Jones’s residences to his vehicles to the homes of other members in the ring. Jones stonewalled throughout, initially telling Metcalf he didn’t have an address and then giving him the wrong apartment number when he did. (Judges require police to offer an exact address before issuing a warrant.)

Lutz arrested Pete Butler and Charles Smith in their respective homes near George’s Chicken while Kevin Coffman and Metcalf surveyed Jones’s apartments, where they confiscated copious amounts of heroin, crack, firearms, and cash. They finally located his Dumfries apartment after finding an estimate for a repair bill in his name at the apartment in Front Royal.

Later that day, when Metcalf finally got his first close-up look at Ronnie Jones in a county jail interviewing room in Front Royal, he found him to be “very smug, very arrogant.”

The feeling was mutual. “He was very aggressive; he harassed people,” Jones said of Metcalf. Jones hated him for delivering a subpoena to the mother of his oldest child—at work, embarrassing and intimidating her, he said—and for interviewing Jones’s mom.

His younger brother, Thomas Jones, told me the family had no idea Ronnie was a big-time heroin dealer until they heard about it on the news.

Their mother was deeply embarrassed by it and did not wish to be interviewed, he said. She had seen him only a week before his arrest. Ronnie stopped by her house in the northern Virginia suburbs to chat after delivering cupcakes to his daughter's school.

Ronnie told his family he'd been running his own computer repair shop, fixing broken laptops, iPads, and cellphones. He even showed them a logo he'd had prepared for the business, called Nu2U.

Metcalf and Jones hated each other instantly. But they had more in common than either of them knew.

Metcalf, forty-four in mid-2013, had worked gang cases in L.A. and drugs in Washington. "From my perspective, in the cities, you take off one drug dealer, and they're not even missed, there's so many," he said.

"But this, this was truly the front lines. You shut down somebody like Ronnie Jones, somebody who's making the whole town dopesick, and you're really making an impact." If he could get Jones or the other FUBI consorts to give up their Harlem source, the effects would be more widespread.

The quest had become deeply personal. The worst event in Bill Metcalf's life had taken place almost four decades earlier on a hot summer night when he was seven years old. He was seated at the dinner table with his parents and older sister when he noticed a police officer running outside the window with his gun drawn.

"Go to your room," Bill's mother told the kids. What Bill didn't know then was that his father was a heroin-addicted drug trafficker, and that his mother felt she had no option other than cooperating with police to have him arrested.

Metcalf remembered running down the stairs the night of the arrest, in time to see officers slam his father against a wall and handcuff him. His father looked at him, his head still pressed against the wall, and told him: "You're the man of the family now. Take care of your mother and your sister." Metcalf said he was more confused than intimidated by the order. He wondered: "How am I going to do this when everyone's so much taller than me?" His mom hustled him and his sister into her car and fled to her

mother's house in Chapmanville, West Virginia, with just the clothes on their backs.

His parents had met in the 1970s, after his mother migrated from West Virginia to Baltimore for factory work; the family moved to Cleveland, chasing better factory jobs, a few years later. His mom did piecework in a Cleveland textile factory while his dad worked sporadically, constantly feeling the tug of his Baltimore hometown.

His father and uncles were in and out of jail, and only the oldest brother of the five, his uncle Bill (for whom Metcalf is named), was not a heroin user. "There were always guys just out of prison showing up at our house. And when my dad's brothers moved to Cleveland, it got progressively out of control," he said. His father sometimes beat his mother, who felt so trapped that she ultimately informed on him to the police. It was her kids' one shot, Georgia Metcalf believed, for a peaceful life.

As a child, Metcalf knew his father loved him. Even then he understood that drugs were the primary driver of his family's instability. "I had seen my father nodding out into the spaghetti, and Mom was like, 'Daddy's sick,'" he recalled. When the antidrug rhetoric of the mid-1980s emerged, he was an immediate convert, buying into the "This is your brain on drugs" ad campaign that featured the searing egg in the iron skillet. To this day, a six-pack of beer would expire in his refrigerator before it would occur to him to drink all six.

"We stood in the cheese line," Metcalf recalled of growing up in Chapmanville, where his mother worked two, sometimes three jobs before becoming one of the county's first female coal miners. The Salvation Army Santa Claus came to their house with Christmas gifts. When his mom died, in 2015, mourners recalled how she had always stood up for the little guy, filling out black-lung benefit forms for her co-workers and threatening to sue the company when she caught a coal-mine manager throwing her and another woman's job applications in the trash.

Asked if he was made fun of as a kid, Metcalf laughed. "Are you kidding? My grandmother chewed tobacco! Everyone at my school was in the same boat. No one had any money."

Chapmanville was, in retrospect, another perfect breeding ground for the opioid epidemic, with OxyContin moving in just as most of the mines were shutting down in the late 1990s, and the only viable economic option—beyond disability and illicit drug sales—was joining the military, one that Metcalf took. He chose the Air Force because the recruiter promised he'd have a job in law enforcement waiting for him when he got out. Playing cops and robbers as a kid, he'd always insisted on being the cop.

“I distinctly remember teachers skipping entire chapters in textbooks because ‘you will not need this when you are working in the mines,’” he told me in late 2016. It took precisely one visit to an active low-coal mine for Metcalf to understand that his future wasn't at the bottom of one.

The next county over, in tiny Kermit, West Virginia, *Charleston Gazette-Mail* reporter Eric Eyre had just won a Pulitzer for pointing out that Big Pharma shipped nearly nine million hydrocodone pills to a single pharmacy in a town of just 392 people, giving Mingo County the fourth-highest prescription opioid death rate of any county in America. Metcalf had seen it coming as early as 1997. Out of the country at the time, he was serving in the Air Force and hated the thought of missing his ten-year high school reunion, though the turnout was dismal.

The chief organizer, a drug user, had absconded with the class-reunion funds.

“When everybody showed up, she wasn't there, and neither was the party,” he said.

By arresting Jones, Metcalf was not only doing his job; he was atoning for the sins of his father. His wife, though, was starting to complain about his obsession with Jones—he routinely worked till midnight or later, leaving her stranded at home with their four kids. With every new conspiracy chart, he promised he'd request a desk job “after this case.”

“I spent one Thanksgiving on the hood of a car,” doing surveillance work, he said. He did not want to end up like Lutz, who'd recently split with his fiancée, partly due to conflicts over work.

A former Air Force military police officer, his wife, Jessica, understood the life. She'd witnessed how enraged Metcalf had been after arresting a

user-dealer in a traffic stop and finding heroin tucked into his baby girl's shoe, the smell of marijuana blanketing the inside of the car.

But their kids were another story. One night in the middle of the FUBI case, Jessica drove them to the task force headquarters to see Metcalf, and his youngest daughter asked him plaintively, "Daddy, is this where you live?"

He renewed his promise to his wife: *After this case...*

"Ronnie Jones was a predator, and the people in Woodstock were sheep to him," Metcalf said. His desire wasn't just to be a big-time heroin dealer, Metcalf believed. It was also "about money. Control. Manipulation. He created a market that didn't exist before, then he manipulated it to increase his profits. And that's the problem with heroin, and why I don't think it's going away: The money is insane, and the customers are always there."

Bulk dealers like Mack, the New York supplier, manipulated Jones by adding their own diabolical spin to the scheme, designed to keep him returning for more: When Jones sent a runner up to Harlem to buy 200 grams of heroin for \$13,000, rather than just give the mule what Jones paid for, Mack typically sent the runner home with double what Jones had ordered—400 grams—plus a bill for an additional \$14,000, amounting to \$5 extra per gram on the fronted drugs. It was double the Pringles at a bargain interest rate, and Jones had no trouble selling the dope.

The rule was: The money had to be paid back to Mack, via Western Union or MoneyGram, before the next order could be placed. The arrangement not only contributed to the exponential growth in heroin in Woodstock and bigger profits for both Mack and Jones, it also created a paper trail that Metcalf could follow. "They thought, 'These country bumpkins will never figure this out,'" Metcalf said.

With Shaw's supply side of the ring still operating, dozens more low- and mid-level user-dealer arrests were made as the summer of 2013 wore on, including in an EconoLodge motel in Dumfries, where police found dealers setting up shop in a room and selling heroin stuffed into the false bottom of a can of Red Bull. As local task force officers staked out more deal-making hot spots, Metcalf tried to home in on Mack.

Wolthuis plotted out the officers' progress on the FUBI chart as one arrest led to another. Every time another person was jailed, Wolthuis tallied the offense by the weight of the drugs sold in grams and by the dosage unit: the number of times someone stuck a needle in his or her arm. One low- to mid-level dealer ended up with a five-year sentence for selling the equivalent of between 6,400 and 14,400 needles' worth of dope.

Metcalf wanted badly to arrest Jones's main girlfriend, in Dumfries—he'd found the Decapitator loaded in a safe in her apartment next to a concealed-carry permit in her name. Surely she was also complicit and not just going to the movies, as she claimed, as Jones's heroin made its way to farmers' kids and high school football stars. Did she really buy Jones's story about fixing computers at the local library? Didn't she realize what paid for all those new Lucky jeans?

Wolthuis, the prosecutor, had to keep reminding Metcalf: "There's this thing the courts require, Bill. It's called evidence."

The E-word became part of their banter, with Wolthuis drawing a giant *E* on a piece of paper and telling Metcalf to stick it to the ceiling above his bed. By the time the case wrapped up the following year, with sixty-six people prosecuted in state courts and eighteen convicted federally, Metcalf presented Wolthuis with a homemade award: a glass-encased can of cheddar cheese Pringles, with a single word on the trophy nameplate: EVIDENCE.

In a corner of Wolthuis's desk, not far from the trophy, he still keeps an old case file open. Experience tells him that the September 2013 death of Jesse Bolstridge, once the Strasburg Rams' defensive star, was connected to the FUBI ring, but the shards of evidence have never fully formed into a whole. "I don't forget this one," he said.

Wolthuis, sixty-one, is known for litigating "death cases," prosecutions of suppliers in which a person has died as a direct result of that dealer's drug. From his perch in the U.S. attorney's office in Roanoke, the same office that prosecuted Purdue Pharma, he's indicted heroin dealers for decades, long enough to witness the transition from a small, fairly quiet group of mostly black and middle-aged users in the mid-1990s to a much

larger, younger, and whiter group. One of his first death cases involved a thirteen-person conspiracy brought to his attention when police found a middle-aged woman slumped over on a chair inside her apartment door, shortly after she'd shot up in the bathroom of a Kentucky Fried Chicken. "She was sitting on a claw hammer when [the officers] found her; they'd just left her there all alone to die." Her friends had propped her up in the chair, he remembered, placed atop the randomly discarded tool.

Another woman prosecuted in that same heroin conspiracy sent her child to the door to deliver the heroin because she was nodding out in her bedroom and couldn't get up. "There's just something so fundamentally soul-sucking about heroin," Wolthuis said.

He said he was still "just waiting for something to fall from the sky" in the Jesse Bolstridge case. The timeline between the point of sale and his death was not airtight: Too much time elapsed between the time Jesse's best friend, Dennis Painter, bought the heroin and the moment Jessie died, some eighteen hours later, and there were too many people with Jesse in the interim and too many other unknowns.

Metcalf and Lutz believe Dennis bought the heroin from a local user-dealer originally supplied by people in the Jones/Shaw ring, but such death cases are hard to prove in the fluid realm where most overdoses occur, and resources are limited. "We don't have the capacity to try everyone involved in a ring of hundreds of people," Wolthuis said. "But we do try to cut the heart out of the monster."

Kristi Fernandez was already scared when a homesick Jesse begged to come home for the weekend from an Asheville sober house in May 2013 against his counselor's advice. She worried that weekend, too, when he disappeared for hours at a stretch with Dennis. She liked Dennis—and still has pictures of the two of them together playing in the sandbox at their preschool, Grasshopper Green—but she knew full well that Dennis had been in and out of drug rehab for heroin. And as far as she knew, Jesse's problem hadn't progressed to that.

When Jesse returned to Asheville that Sunday night, he tested positive for marijuana and, per the contract he signed when entering the program,

counselors booted him out. He had loved living there, telling his Facebook friends a month earlier: “I’m grateful to have such a big support group, I love all of my family & friends. They’re the best.”

And: “So glad to be sober on this date. 93 days!”

Those same supportive counselors advised Kristi not to welcome Jesse home after his dismissal, but she took him in anyway. “I don’t regret that,” she says. “I was not going to leave my eighteen-year-old son in a different state with nowhere to live.”

And unlike Jamie Waldrop, the Roanoke mother and surgeon’s wife, Kristi could not afford to spend thousands sending her son immediately to another rehab, or flying with him to make sure the transfer stuck. Kristi had already sent Jesse to a rehab in Jacksonville once, in January 2013, a ten-week treatment regimen that began with intensive counseling and medical detox, during which Jesse briefly took buprenorphine (more commonly known by the brand name Suboxone), a partial-opioid agonist designed to stem cravings. Jesse still owed \$25,000 for that earlier rehab stint, even though he was on his mother’s insurance, paying \$25 a week that he had autodeducted from his checking account.

He was weaned off Suboxone after three weeks, a not-uncommon practice that would become increasingly controversial as the treatment became more prominent. As National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) director Nora Volkow told me in January 2016: “To be clear, the evidence supports long-term maintenance with these medicines in the context of behavioral treatment and recovery support, not short-term detoxification programs aimed at abstinence.”

NIDA, the Institute of Medicine, the World Health Organization, and the White House drug czar’s office would all agree that indefinite (and maybe even lifelong) maintenance treatment is superior to abstinence-based rehab for opioid-use disorder. And even Hazelden, the Betty Ford–affiliated center that originated the concept of the twenty-eight-day rehab, changed its stance on medication-assisted treatment, or MAT, offering Suboxone to some patients in 2012.

But the rehab Jesse went to was aimed at abstinence, as most were, then

and now.

“The whole system needs revamped,” said Tracey Helton Mitchell, a recovering heroin user, author, and activist. “In the United States, we are very attached to our twelve-step rehabs, which are not affordable, not standardized from one place to another, and not necessarily effective” for the opioid-addicted.

Clearly, more recent data supports ongoing MAT, but there is a catch: “One of the reasons people stay so hopeless about the epidemic is that, in any given episode, they only see a small proportion of people get into remission,” Harvard researcher John Kelly told me.

“What happens is, it takes about eight years on average, after people start treatment, to get one year of sobriety...and four to five different episodes of treatment” for that sobriety to stick.

And many people simply don't have eight years.

After being kicked out of the sober-living house in Asheville, Jesse moved back home and took a construction job with his father, commuting ninety miles one way to the D.C. suburbs, where they worked on a government contract and Jesse earned \$1,000 a week.

He was a good worker. He was pleasant to be around. And he lived rent-free with his mom. And so Kristi was stymied, later that summer, when the overdraft notices from Jesse's bank started piling up.

“I can't stop,” he finally admitted to his mom. He was spending \$200 a day on black-market opiates, he told her, and asked for help returning to rehab in Florida. He was so high then that she refused to allow him to come home, to protect his younger sisters. But she arranged for him to stay in a nearby town with her sister, who made him hamburgers that night and let him sleep on her couch. He used what she believed was the last of his money to buy an airline ticket to Jacksonville. He was forty-eight hours away from a do-over, the insurance and admissions paperwork already arranged.

And yet Kristi still didn't comprehend the depth of her son's addiction. “I hate to even say it, but I thought he was going back to rehab for ‘just pills.’” Jesse still looked like a linebacker, after all. He was handsome and

tanned. He hadn't missed a day of work at his construction job. "They'd leave at four a.m., and that's not easy work," she said. He had plans to start community college in January 2014, then transfer to a four-year university. His goal was to become a phys-ed teacher, coach, or sports medicine trainer. He hungered still for the football field.

The idea that her son was shooting up heroin hadn't crossed her mind, she said, then corrected herself: The truth was, the thought had crossed her mind; she just hadn't let it roost. Despite evidence to the contrary. Despite having already padlocked her bedroom door, to keep Jesse from stealing money for drugs.

Only later would she learn about the spent syringes found on the Porta-John floor at the construction site where Jesse worked. Only later would she understand that Jesse lied about his dismissal from a warehouse job a year earlier. He swore he had nothing to do with the syringes his boss found in the bathroom, and Kristi believed him. How could someone who looked that robust be addicted to heroin?

It was late September 2013, and news of Jones's heroin ring hadn't yet appeared in the local press, though several arrests had already been made, and federal agents were working with local police from seven counties to target the leaders of what they were privately calling one of the largest heroin rings in the state. The region's pill problem had become a full-fledged heroin epidemic in the span of just a few months.

But the only ones to know about it—other than the addicted—were a handful of cops.

That Friday night, two days before Jesse was scheduled to fly to a Jacksonville treatment center for his do-over, Dennis was deep in the throes of dopesickness when he and Jesse stole insulin needles from Jesse's grandmother and bought heroin.

"I was puking," Dennis recalled of their last day together. "I told him, I was like, 'I gotta gotta get this dope.'"

"I'm not trying to do dope," said Jesse, who'd spent the summer injecting black-market Roxys. But the pills had worn off, and he, too, had been throwing up off and on all day. He tried eating his two favorite foods

—McDonald’s chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese—but couldn’t keep them down.

As soon as Dennis made the buy, Jesse relented, deciding it would be his final hurrah before returning to rehab. They hosted a going-away party at a friend’s house. Late that night, a mutual friend broke down crying when she saw Jesse shoot up in front of people; he’d never before been so open about his heroin use, she told me.

But Jesse assured his friends that he liked the rehab he was returning to. Even though he missed his mom and twin teenage sisters, Jesse said, he liked being with people his age going through the same struggle as he was. He hugged Dennis’s girlfriend, Courtney Fletcher, and told her, “I promise, I’m gonna be OK.”

The next morning, as several friends left to go four-wheeling, Jesse came out of the spare bedroom complaining of a headache. Courtney offered him Tylenol from her purse, but Jesse declined and returned to the bedroom, she said.

Two hours later, Dennis saw that Jesse’s door was cracked open and went in to bum a cigarette. His bed was empty.

A few steps away, Dennis found his best friend unconscious in the bathroom, slumped over the vanity, a needle stuck in his arm and the belt he’d used to tie off with in a perfect circle on the floor.

“What do I do?” he shouted, running back and forth between the living room and the bathroom, screaming and crying and grabbing his hair. Some friends quickly fled, chucking the drugs and the paraphernalia into the woods beside the house.

Courtney was one of them. She said she ran because she feared her children would be removed by social service workers. (She does not do drugs, she said, and her kids had been asleep in an upstairs bedroom throughout the party and were not exposed.)

Dennis called 911 and waited for police.

By the time Lutz arrived—between two and six hours later—rigor mortis had set in. “I think there’s still something they’re not telling me,” Kristi says about why Jesse’s friends waited so long to call 911. “Jesse usually

used pills instead of heroin, and I don't think he'd use alone. I'd feel better knowing that he was not alone when he died.”

Lutz remembered thinking how strange it was: Here was a fit, burly construction worker, a guy who'd just put in forty hours of work that week, felled to his core by the diabolical drug.

When a cellphone atop the bathroom vanity rang that morning, Lutz picked it up. It was a counselor, calling Jesse to confirm his Sunday arrival time at the Jacksonville rehab.

Over the next several weeks, Metcalf pounded Ronnie Jones with questions, trying to get him to reveal his source. But Jones denied being a drug dealer, denied that the confiscated guns and drugs belonged to him. And who the hell was Mack?

It didn't help Jones's case that his gun, recovered from the Dumfries apartment, had Jones's DNA on it, as did another gun, reported stolen from a car in Woodstock. Or that Metcalf had multiple witnesses claiming that Jones threatened to kill them with it if they didn't pay off their drug debts.

Police even recorded phone calls from Jones trying to coordinate drug pickups and sales—from inside the jail.

“Shit don't stop,” he told one of his girlfriends.

He wrote angry letters to people, telling Marie he still loved her but was mad that she'd dined him to police. Above all, he wanted people to know, he was not a snitch.

“Arthur, I have been hearing a lot of foul shit lately from people who you have spoke to,” began one of Jones's letters from jail. “I want to set the record straight...I never told/snitch on you. NEVER....After that nigga Logan [Rose] gave all that info to the [feds] they still told him he would be charged, and he ran to Puerto Rico with his girl that he met at George's. Do you see me putting a bad bone out there on you for that shit? Hell no, because I'm going to wait until I see you face to face to ask you about it like a man...I don't want nobody fucking up my name or character in these streets or jails. If you got questions just holla at me.”

Though most of the user-dealers were happy to sing, it was code among the people at Jones's level to behave as if not only their dignity was at stake

but also their lives, which quite possibly they were.

Not so with dealer Kareem Shaw, who was happy to pull back the curtain on the FUBI ring when the task force arrested him four months after Jesse's death. Best of all, he led Metcalf to a key piece of information: a face.

"You saw the video, right?" he asked Metcalf.

What video?

An eighty-minute production, *Hell Up in East Harlem* was a gritty, street-level documentary about a Harlem block plagued by gang violence during the crack epidemic of the late 1980s and '90s. It was all available on YouTube and so, around minute thirty, was the source of the tsunami of misery that descended on Woodstock a decade after the film was made.

Seated on a bench for the camera, Mack wore a red hoodie. He bemoaned the fact that death and prison seemed too often to be the only avenues out of the loop of poverty and drugs.

Appearing on camera had been a rookie mistake for the young, then-low-level dealer, who described walking the block and seeing "guts and brains....That shit be like some real walkin' hell shit," he said. "N—s gettin' laid out."

Shaw watched the video with Metcalf and, dutifully—in exchange for substantial assistance at sentencing time—he pointed out Mack. Though the filmmakers identified him only as Matt Doogie, Metcalf was thrilled to have a visual of his target.

"Now I could hear his voice and see his mannerisms," he said.

Still, not even Shaw, who was from New York City and forged the initial connection to Mack through a cousin, knew Mack's real name. He could, however, describe the general vicinity of the Harlem heroin mill where Mack "stepped on," or cut, the pure tan powder, diluting it to extend their profits before re-rocking it into pucks.

Metcalf now had more than enough proof to arrest Mack based on witness testimony and scores of cellphone exchanges among Jones, Shaw, and Mack. But where exactly was the apartment, and who exactly was Mack? He felt as if he were being taunted by a ghost.

“Most agents would have written it off, but Metcalf was not gonna leave it alone,” Wolthuis said.

In a city of almost eight and a half million people, now all Metcalf had to do was find the ghost.

Mack had recently been released from prison; Metcalf knew that much. One witness remembered that when Jones first landed in Woodstock and struggled to buy bulk heroin, a friend had tipped him off to Mack: “When my cousin gets out [of prison], it’s game on; he’s got the connects.”

Mack was by now a pro, with lawyers on retainer and a network of assistants. Earlier, when he learned that Jones threatened to shoot a customer if he didn’t pay back his drug debt, Mack rebuked Jones, telling him, “Why would you do that? You’re running a business. If you want to harm someone, don’t do it yourself. We’ve got people for that.”

But Mack didn’t always make the best choices about which details to delegate and which jobs to personally execute. When Shaw paid Mack back for the heroin he’d fronted him, the payments were retrieved in cities across the country—in MoneyGram kiosks from New York to San Diego. Someone was picking up the money for Mack, and Metcalf figured it had to be someone he trusted, a relative or girlfriend, perhaps. (On federal probation, Mack wasn’t allowed to leave the state without checking in with his probation officer.)

Late one night, working out of the regional drug task force office in Front Royal, in the upstairs bedroom of an unmarked house, Metcalf reached out to the security department at MoneyGram, read out the transaction numbers from the text messages, and ultimately came away with a woman’s name and several seemingly random addresses in Brooklyn, Harlem, and the Bronx.

He cross-referenced the addresses and found one that turned out to be legitimate. He was stunned when, the next morning, he ran that address through the city’s probation and parole database and found a single match: a Brooklyn probationer named Matthew Santiago. It had to be Mack.

The thirty-seven-year-old New York native had recently finished a two-year prison stint for his part in a \$2 million marijuana-trafficking

conspiracy. He'd gotten out of prison just a few weeks before Jones's business in Woodstock picked up.

"What's he look like?" Metcalf asked the probation officer.

"Black male, with a beard."

Metcalf asked for a picture via email, and a few minutes later, there he was on his computer screen: an older version of Matt Doogie.

Metcalf now had everything he needed to arrest Mack: a name, a picture, and an address.

The night before, it had occurred to Bill Metcalf, when he was sorting through MoneyGram receipts, that he was no better than his father. The work had become its own kind of addiction. "We're both chasing the same thing, on different sides of the law," he said. "He enjoyed the streets and friends over family, and the pursuit of this lifestyle. And here I am, chasing those guys, and choosing that over my family."

His wife wanted to try for a boy; it would be their fifth child after four girls. "It's one more jelly sandwich, who cares?" she argued, begging him, again, to ask for a desk job.

After he cut the heart out of the monster, he promised, he'd ask for a transfer. For the first time, he meant it.

He found Mack outside his apartment building in Brooklyn, walking his dog.

"Who are you? Where you from?" Santiago wanted to know.

"I'm an ATF agent from Virginia, and that's where you're going," Metcalf said.

Santiago told him that he'd never been to Virginia, which may have been true.

Santiago had two children. They would be seventeen and fourteen by the time his case rolled through a federal courtroom in Harrisonburg, Virginia, the following year. Judge Michael Urbanski would approve a plea deal negotiated after a series of meetings between Wolthuis and Santiago's lawyer—who, incidentally, had been at the Southern District of New York courthouse in Manhattan waiting for him on the day of his arrest. "The elevators opened, and there was his lawyer; he'd already beaten us there,"

Metcalf said, believing the quick legal service signified high-level cartel connections.

Wolthuis wasn't so sure, saying that the E-word—evidence—just wasn't there. "If Santiago was truly Mr. Big, why would he be selling to a couple of wahoos in a small Virginia town?"

Santiago had tried to find work when he got out of prison, picking up odd jobs, his attorney wrote in his presentence memorandum. But finding legitimate employment is exceedingly hard for felons, and the odd-job income wasn't enough to provide for his family, so "against his better judgment [he] drifted back into criminal activity," his attorney noted. "He deeply regrets his actions, and is aware of the strict penalty he is about to face. He has let down his children and feels a great sense of guilt and shame for his actions." His father was murdered when he was four months old, and Santiago, a high school dropout, grew up mired in poverty, the report said. In his late twenties, he ran a small party- and event-planning company, called Self-Made, and worked freelance as a music-video stylist.

Compared with Jones, who received a twenty-three-year prison sentence, and Shaw, whose cooperation earned him the lesser sentence of eighteen years, Santiago was merely a "flipper," as Wolthuis described him, not part of the on-the-ground heroin distribution ring. He pleaded guilty to distributing between three and ten kilos of heroin, which equates to an average of sixty-five thousand shots of the drug, and was sentenced to ten years in federal prison.

On the day of his sentencing, Metcalf personally transported him to a federal courthouse in Charlottesville. On the way, Santiago tried to taunt him. He wanted to know if Metcalf had heard about the recent slaying of two New York Police Department officers. They'd been ambushed by a Baltimore man who bragged on Instagram that he was "putting wings on pigs." Metcalf nodded.

"Metcalf, you really think you're doing something, don't you?" Santiago said. "But you ain't changing nothing. This shit ain't going away."

"Man, I'm just doing my job," Metcalf said.

"Helluva thing to take a man away from his family," Santiago said.

"Yes, it is," Metcalf agreed.

Santiago reminded him one more time: There were people out there who were not afraid to put wings on pigs.

Jones and Santiago were right, of course. Shit did not stop. That's not the way addiction works. That's not typically how prison reentry plays out. It didn't stop when Dennis Painter's father moved heaven and earth to get him into treatment again in the wake of Jesse Bolstridge's death—only to have him continually push through the revolving door of rehab, relapse, and jail.

Naming his new baby after Jesse as a reminder didn't stop Dennis's behavior either. Nor did the abstinence-only Nashville treatment center his dad sent him to, his seventh attempt to get clean. "I've never gone through the stages of grief about Jesse," Dennis told me. He said he'd tried to kill himself "like six times, but it just didn't work. I've just been getting high since it happened."

When the Jones/Shaw ring came to a close, Dennis and his friends simply got back on the heroin highway to Baltimore—although in nearby Winchester he could now buy it for \$20 a bag, compared with \$30 when bought from a runner in Woodstock.

I told Dennis that Jesse's mom, Kristi, really needed to know what happened the morning that Jesse died. "She wants me to vividly describe what I saw when I walked into the bathroom, but she doesn't need that image in her head," Dennis said. He added that he used to go to Jesse's grave but stopped because it was just too hard. "I have a lot of guilt about it. I want to write a letter, get some things off my chest. It feels like if I'd never gone to get the dope that day, he'd still be alive today." Dennis used to spend Thanksgiving at Jesse's house. He, too, had preschool pictures of them at Grasshopper Green.

Dennis described the problem exactly as Metcalf had: If OxyContin had been the economic driver in the Appalachian coalfields, then the heroin highway to Baltimore had become one of the few avenues left for America's small-town working class. Can't get a job in a factory? Drive to Baltimore instead. An investment of \$4,000, or 50 grams of heroin, could earn a person \$60,000 in a single week.

Don't want to drive all the way to Baltimore? Your returns won't be as high, but you could now drive in just twenty minutes to Little Baltimore: Martinsburg, West Virginia. That's what happens when rural America becomes the new inner city, ranking dead last behind cities, suburbs, and

small metro areas in measures of socioeconomic well-being that include college attendance, income, and male labor-force participation.

“They can make all the task forces they want, but they’re never gonna stop it because the profits are just too great,” Dennis said. “And the heroin is only getting closer and closer and closer.”

Dennis’s plan, when I talked to him the summer after Santiago went to prison, was to take what some call the geographic cure. He wanted to move to a bigger city with a younger and more ingrained sober-living culture, along with better jobs. “I’ve already moved from Strasburg to Middletown thinking that would help, but I just found people there. Then I moved to Winchester, but I found people who got high there, too.” His girlfriend used to hear him talking to himself in the bedroom, “but I think he’s really talking to Jesse,” she told me.

His next move, I learned from a sheriff’s department Facebook posting, was to get hauled back to jail on a probation violation. In his mug shot, Dennis wore an orange jumpsuit, and his eyes were so squinty you couldn’t tell they were blue. He was down to 140 pounds, from his usual 185.

I had just interviewed Dennis’s girlfriend, Courtney, the mother of his children. She was attending community college to become a paralegal; her kids went to a federally funded day care facility while Dennis’s father paid for their housing. She was working at McDonald’s in Strasburg, where Jesse bought his McNuggets on the weekend of his death. One of the low-level dealers in the Jones/Shaw ring—the guy who sold them the heroin that killed Jesse—often showed up at her drive-through window for food.

In 2013, Jesse’s was one of 8,257 heroin-related deaths in the nation, by far the majority of them young men, an increase of a staggering 39 percent over the previous year.

Roughly three-quarters of the dead had started down the same painkiller path that led Jesse to his death, the same path as Spencer Mumpower, Scott Roth, and Colton Banks—with a single prescription pill.

A month after Jesse’s death, the FDA approved a new high-potency, long-acting version of hydrocodone, Zohydro ER, even after its own expert panel voted 11–2 against it, noting that the drug, which lacked an abuse

deterrent, could lead to the same level of addiction and abuse as OxyContin had in its original form. The FDA concluded that “the benefits of this product outweigh the risks.”

It would be four more years before the FDA would ask a pharmaceutical company to withdraw an opioid pain medication because of its potential for abuse—Opana ER, and not until 2017—and by then the annual death toll for drug overdose had climbed to 64,000.

Critics pointed out the inherent conflicts of a regulatory agency that both approves drugs and is then supposed to function as a watchdog over those drugs. The Zohydro approval was the OxyContin story all over again, said Dr. Andrew Kolodny, a doctor who lobbies for stronger painkiller restrictions.

“The most damaging thing Purdue did, it wasn’t the misbranding of OxyContin they got in trouble for. It was that they made the medical community feel more comfortable with opioids as a class of drugs,” Kolodny told me. “But had the FDA been doing its job properly with regards to opioids, we never would have had this epidemic.”

Two weeks before Jesse’s death, the FDA finally notified Barbara Van Rooyan via letter that a portion of her petition had been approved—specifically, her call to withdraw its approval of the original OxyContin. The point was by then moot, of course; Purdue had already voluntarily withdrawn it, three years after the reformulation came to market. “I think my petition did ultimately help [push the reformulation], but so many more people died while we were waiting for it,” Van Rooyan said. Months later, she said, after reading a *New Yorker* piece on the Sackler brothers, it dawned on her that the reformulation had almost certainly been prompted by the fact that Purdue was losing its patent on the original formulation, “not because they believed the reformulated version was safer, nor because of my petition.”

Still, the letter from the FDA disgusted and angered her and made her mourn all over again for Patrick—and the thousands of newly extinguished lives.

In the same letter, the FDA denied her secondary request, which was to have the drug limited to severe, acute, or terminal pain—and not prescribed for chronic use unless all other treatments had first been explored, guidelines most other countries in the world have adopted. Americans,

representing 4.4 percent of the world's population, consume roughly 30 percent of its opioids.

Patrick had been dead now for nine years.

It would be three more years before another federal agency would put his mother's suggestions into practice.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Three

“A Broken System”



George's Chicken, Edinburg, Virginia

OceanofPDF.com