

## PROLOGUE

### HOME

As you look down after takeoff from O'Hare International Airport, headed west for San Francisco, California, it's only a few minutes before the intricate complexity of Chicago's suburban streets is overcome by the rolling swell of the prairie. The change is visceral as the plane's shadow floats past houses hidden within protective moats of red cedar and evergreen shelter belts. The land unfolds a geometric sweep of corn and switchgrass. Grain elevators shine like tiny pieces in a diorama; next to them, venous brown-water creeks extend their fingers warily onto the negative space of the prairie. And if you look closely as the plane climbs past Mississippi Lock and Dam Number 10, on the Iowa side of the river, you'll see a little town called Oelwein, population 6,772. You'll see, for a few ascendant moments, every street, every building, and every pickup truck in brittle, detailed relief. Briefly, you can look at this photographic image of a town, imagining the lives of the people there with voyeuristic pleasure. And then Oelwein (along with your curiosity, perhaps) is gone.

Such is the reality of thousands of small communities dotting the twenty-eight landlocked states of the American flyover zone. Lying beneath some of the most traveled air routes in the world, they are part of, and yet seemingly estranged from, the rest of the

country. In many ways, it's easier to get from New York to Los Angeles, or from Dallas to Seattle, than it is to get from anywhere in America to Oelwein, Iowa. Yet much of what there is to know about the United States at the beginning of the new millennium is on display right there, gossiping at the Morning Perk café, waiting for calls at Re/Max Realty, or seeing patients in the low brick building occupied by the Hallberg Family Practice. In their anonymity, and perhaps now more than ever, towns like Oelwein go a long way toward telling us who we are and how we fit into the world. Who we are may well surprise you.

Look again, then, this time from the window of a commuter flight from Chicago as it descends into Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on a clear May morning. Follow the gentle arc of I-380 north, over the Cedar River and past the red-and-white-checked logo of the Purina plant, which bathes everything for miles around in the sweet smell of breakfast cereal. What appears from the plane window to be only a few inches is really an hour's drive to the junction of Highway 150, a no-nonsense two-laner that eschews the complexity of cloverleaf exits and overpasses. Every twenty miles or so, the speed limit drops from fifty-five to twenty-five as Highway 150 bisects another cluster of three- and four-story buildings bookended by red-brick churches and bright metallic water towers. The names of the towns are as companionable and familiar as the country is harsh: Bryantsburg, Independence, and Hazleton accompany the road all the way to where the Amish homesteads sit kitty-corner from the Sportsmen's Lounge. There, just across the Fayette County line, is Oelwein, pronounced *OL-wine*.

Like most small towns in Iowa, Oelwein's four square miles are arranged on a grid system divided into quadrants. At what would be the intersection of the x and y axes is the central feature of Oelwein's architecture and economy: the century-old Chicago Great Western roundhouse, where trains were once turned back north or south and where entire lines of railroad cars could be worked on without regard for the often-brutal weather outside. An enormous

brick and steel structure the size of three football fields, the round-house, like the town it long supported, is the biggest thing for many miles. Amid the isolation, Oelwein's very presence defines the notion of somewhere.

On the surface, Oelwein would appear to be typical in every way. Driving into town from the south, you first notice the softening profile of the maples and oaks that fill out the middle distance of an otherwise flat landscape. Once you are inside the city limits, Oelwein's skyline is divided between the five-story white spire of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church and, six blocks farther north, the four-story red bell tower of Grace Methodist. Between them is a jewelry store, a sporting goods shop, two banks, a florist, a movie house, and four restaurants, all housed in turn-of-the-twentieth-century brick and stone buildings. Across the street from Las Flores Mexican Restaurant, there's a clothing boutique, a photography studio, and a crafts store. There are almost as many bars in Oelwein (eleven) as there are churches (thirteen). The biggest congregations are Lutheran and Catholic, owing to the two separate movements of immigrants into the county: Scandinavians and Bavarians at the end of the nineteenth century; Irish and Italians at the beginning of the twentieth. Von Tuck's Bier Haus generally sees the high-end clientele, which is likely to stop in following a lasagna supper at Leo's Italian Restaurant, the newest incarnation of a business that Frank Leo began as a grocery store in 1922, shortly after arriving from Italy. The Do Drop Inn, on the other hand, is Oelwein's seediest and most eclectic watering hole. Run by Mildred Binstock, the Do Drop, as it's known, is decorated in what Mildred terms "High Amish Kitsch," a smorgasbord of lace doilies, mismatched wooden chairs, and all manner of antique farm equipment washed in the harsh reds and soft greens of year-round Christmas lights.

Heading south on Main Street, back toward Hazleton, you'll find a Dollar General, a Kmart, and a Kum and Go gas station. For the most part, though, things in Oelwein are still owned by the same

families that have owned them forever. There is no Starbucks, and there are no plans for one. This is not a town that thrives on fanfare. Luxury is not a word that comes to mind inside either of Oelwein's clothing stores, VG's and Sam's, where wool dominates the fabrics of the men's suits and the ladies' dresses alike. Practical, on the other hand, is a word that applies at nearly every turn. Even the photography studio, despite its large picture window full of high school vanity shots, has a decidedly utilitarian feel, owing in part to the long shadow cast by the wide aluminum awning—a necessary accoutrement in an area of the Midwest that sees three feet of rain and five feet of snow in a normal year.

The closest thing to opulence in Oelwein comes in the predictably reserved form of a coffee shop, the Morning Perk. There, members of Oelwein's professional class gather each morning around an antique oak dresser featuring brushed aluminum carafes of both regular and flavored coffee. Next to the carafes, a wicker basket is filled with containers of liquid creamers in hazelnut, amaretto, and cinnamon flavors—this in a state (and a region) where packages of granulated nondairy creamer are *de rigueur*. Their husbands off to work, the wives of Oelwein's best-known men (the mayor, the high school principal, the police chief, and the Methodist minister) linger on big couches and in stiff-backed chairs to gossip and make collages. Later, it's off to the Kokomo to have their hair and nails done.

How and where you drink your coffee speaks volumes about who you are and what you do in Oelwein. Three doors away from the Morning Perk is the Hub City Bakery, a leaner, more hard-edged sibling of its sophisticate sister. Painted a dirty, aging white, and with a long, family-style folding table covered in a paper tablecloth, Hub City looks less like a café and more like the kitchen of a clapboard farmhouse. There is no focaccia or three-bean soup. In fact, there's not even a menu. Instead, there's a plastic case of doughnuts and a two-burner gas stove where the cook and owner fries eggs destined for cold white toast on a paper plate. Not that

the old men mind as they linger at the table, layered in various forms of Carhartt: their discussions of corn prices and the relative merits and deficiencies of various herbicides are ongoing, if not interminable. A refined palate is not a prerequisite for entry at what is referred to by regulars as simply “the Bakery,” though it helps to be short on appointments and long on opinions. Questioning the cook, like taking your coffee with cream, amounts to something like a breach of etiquette.

Together, the separate constituencies of Oelwein’s two cafés give a sense of the pillars on which society in that town is built. Life in a small midwestern town lingers in the bars and passes weekly through the church sanctuaries. But it’s rooted in the stores that line Main Street, and on the green and yellow latticework sprawl of the farms that begin just feet from where the pavement ends. The fit is symbiotic, though not always seamless. Without the revenues generated by the likes of the 480-acre Lein operation—a sheep and corn farm twelve miles north of town—Repeats Consignment Store and Van Denver Jewelry Plus would be hard-pressed to stay in business. As life in the fields and along the sidewalks goes, so goes the life of the town, and along with it, the life of the hospital, the high school, and the local Christmas pageant, for which Oelwein is known throughout at least two counties.

And yet, things are not entirely what they seem. On a sultry May evening, with the Cedar Rapids flight long gone back to Chicago, and temperatures approaching ninety degrees at dusk, pass by the Perk and Hub City on the way into Oelwein’s tiny Ninth Ward. Look down at the collapsing sidewalk, or across the vacant lot at a burned-out home. At the Conoco station, just a few blocks south of Sacred Heart, a young man in a trench coat picks through the Dumpster, shaking despite the heat. Here, amid the double-wides of the Ninth Ward, among the packs of teenage boys riding, gang-like, on their Huffy bicycles, the economy and culture of Oelwein are more securely tied to a drug than to either of the two industries that have forever sustained the town: farming and small business.

This is the part of Oelwein, and of the small-town United States, not visible from the plane window as the flat stretch of the country rolls by. After sundown in the Ninth Ward, the warm, nostalgic light that had bathed the nation beneath a late-afternoon transcontinental flight is gone.

Against the oppressive humidity, the night's smells begin to take shape. Mixed with the moist, organic scent of cut grass at dew point is the ether-stink of methamphetamine cooks at work in their kitchens. Main Street, just three blocks distant, feels as far away as Chicago. For life in Oelwein is not, in fact, a picture-postcard amalgamation of farms and churches and pickup trucks, Fourth of July fireworks and Nativity scenes, bake sales and Friday-night football games. Nor is life simpler or better or truer here than it is in Los Angeles or New York or Tampa or Houston. Life in the small-town United States has, though, changed considerably in the last three decades. It wasn't until 2005—when news of the methamphetamine epidemic began flooding the national media—that people began taking notice. Overnight, the American small town and methamphetamine became synonymous. Main Street was no longer divided between Leo's and the Do Drop Inn, or between the Perk and the Bakery: it was partitioned between the farmer and the tweaker. How this came to be—and what it tells us about who we are—is the story of this book. And this book is the story of Oelwein, Iowa.

By the time I went to Iowa in May 2005, I'd already spent six years watching meth and rural America come together. The first time I ran across the drug in a way that suggested its symbolic place in the heartland was not in Iowa but in Idaho, in a little town called Gooding. I went to Gooding in the fall of 1999 to do a magazine story on that town's principal industry, ranching. At the time, I didn't know what meth was; it was completely by accident that I found myself in a place overrun with the drug, though the obviousness of

meth's effects was immediate. That first night in Gooding, I went to have dinner at the Lincoln Inn, a combination roadhouse and restaurant. On Friday nights, the road crews who'd busied themselves all week paving and grading the county's few byways descended on the Lincoln to drink beer. An inordinate number of them, it seemed to me, were also high on meth. When the sheriff and a deputy drove by in the alley around midnight, they stopped to look in through the back door. Then they got back in their cruiser and drove away. What could they do, the two of them, faced with a room full of crank users? Two nights later, I was in the bunkhouse of a nearby ranch when three Mexicans drove up in a white Ford F-150. They were meth dealers, and the oldest among them, a nineteen-year-old who gave his name as Coco and said he'd been deported three times in the last four years, explained the crank business to me this way: "At first we give it away. Then the addicts will do anything to get more." Meth, it seemed, was just a part of life for the 1,286 inhabitants of Gooding, Idaho.

Back in 1999, very little was being written about the drug, with the exception of a few newspapers on the West Coast and a smattering of smaller ones like the Idaho *Mountain Express*. At the time, I was living in New York City. To read the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and even the *Chicago Tribune* was to be largely unaware of methamphetamine's spread throughout the United States. When I talked to friends about what I'd seen in Gooding, no one believed it. That, or they dismissed crank as one more unseen, unfathomable aspect of life in The Middle: as prevalent as corn, as inscrutable as the farm bill, and as tacky as evangelical theology. Whether I traveled to Ennis, Montana, to Merced, California, or to Canton, Georgia, local consciousness of the drug was invariably acute, even as meth somehow avoided coherent, national scrutiny. For four years, wherever I went, there meth was, as easy to discount as it was to discover; once I was back in any major American city—be it New York or Chicago—whatever I'd seen or heard lost all context. I even began to get the feeling that the drug was

somehow following me around. I tried and failed on numerous occasions to convince my agent and several magazine and book editors that meth in American small towns was a major issue. Eventually, I tried to forget about it and move on. But I couldn't ignore what I saw in November 2004, five years after being in Idaho, which is that meth had become a major feature in the landscape of my home.

I grew up near St. Louis, Missouri. Fifty-five miles away, near the town of Greenville, Illinois, is a wetland complex that is one of the more important stopover points in North America for what is annually the world's most concentrated migration of waterfowl. I've duck-hunted there for much of my life, and consider Greenville to be a part of the place, largely defined, from which I come. Like St. Louis, Greenville sits in the midst of the bluff prairies and timbered hollows that once stretched along the Mississippi Valley from east-central Missouri down to Kentucky. Together, this area is a discrete subset of the southern Midwest, unified by a geography, an accent, an economy, and a cultural sensibility that is an elemental part of who I am. Hunting ducks each autumn at Carlyle Lake has always served as an annual exploration of my family's history, for the birds that hatch on the prairies of northwest Iowa and the Dakotas migrate south, like my father did six decades ago, down the Missouri River toward the promise of St. Louis. There, they meet with great masses that have moved north along the Mississippi River, just as thousands of people have done, my grandmother included: she left an Ozark mountain subsistence farm along Ebo Creek, Missouri, and came looking for a better life on the fertile floodplain that surrounds St. Louis. Not far from where the two strands of my family came together, there's Carlyle Lake, and the little town of Greenville, where I have always felt at home. Somehow, despite having run across meth in small towns all over the Mountain and Middle West, I had persisted in thinking that the area where I grew up was somehow immune to its presence. That all changed one night in Greenville.



I was in Ethan's Place, a bar to which I've retired for many years after duck hunting. There, I met two men whom I'll call Sean and James. Sean was a skinhead. He'd just a few days earlier been released from the Illinois state penitentiary after serving six years for grand theft auto and manufacture of methamphetamine with the intent to distribute. He was a thin and wiry six feet one, 170 pounds, with a shaved head and a predictable mixture of Nazi tattoos. He was twenty-six years old. James was black, twenty-eight years old, and a heavily muscled six feet three. His frame was less sturdy, it seemed, than his burden, for James moved with a kind of exhausted resignation, like someone who suffers from chronic pain. For the last six years, James had been serving with the Army Airborne, first in Afghanistan, where he participated in the invasion of that country; then in Iraq, where he was also a member of the initial offensive; and finally, as a policeman back in Afghanistan, where he'd found himself in the curious position of protecting people who had been shooting at him a couple of years before. Like Sean, James had been in a sort of prison, and he was finally home.

Shared history is stronger than the forced affiliations mandated by jail or the military, and pretty soon James and Sean, the black and the neo-Nazi, talked amiably about all the people they knew in common. They drank the local specialty, the Bucket of Fuckit, a mixture of draft beer, ice, and whatever liquor the bartender sees fit to mix together in a plastic bucket. As they played pool, James stalked around the table, shooting first and assessing the situation later, each time hitting the balls more aggressively. The contours of his face formed themselves into a look of desperate perplexity beneath the shadow of his St. Louis Cardinals cap. Why, he seemed to be thinking, will the balls not go in?

Sean, too, moved around the table with a kind of pent-up aggression. Whereas James's muscular shoulders sagged in defeat beneath his knee-length Sean John rugby shirt, Sean's movements were fluid and decisive inside his Carhartts. His confidence was

palpable. The enormous pupils of his blue eyes brimming with lucid possibility, Sean easily crushed James in the game of pool. Sean was riding the long, smooth shoulder of a crank binge.

As I shot pool and talked with James and Sean over several nights, it hit me with great force that meth was not, in fact, following me around. Nor was it just a coincidental aspect of life in the places I'd happened to be in the last half decade, in Gooding or Los Angeles or Helena. Meth was indeed everywhere, including in the most important place: the area from which I come. There, it stood to derail the lives of two people with whom, under only slightly different circumstances, I could easily have grown up.

Meeting Sean and James took away the abstraction that I'd felt regarding meth since 1999. In the wake of what I'd seen in Greenville, writing a book about the meth epidemic suddenly took on the weight of a moral obligation. Around that same time, after a decade in New York City, I'd begun yearning to return to the Midwest. My desire to understand the puzzle of meth had now conspired with an instinct to view the fullness of the place I'd left when I was eighteen. So, too, was the need to consider both parts of the puzzle growing more urgent. By mid-2005, meth was widely considered, as *Newsweek* magazine put it in its August 8 cover story, "America's Most Dangerous Drug."

In the end, meth would have a prolonged moment in the spotlight during 2005 and 2006, which can in some ways be traced to a late-2004 series called "Unnecessary Epidemic," written by Steve Suo for the *Oregonian*, an influential newspaper in Portland. In all, the *Oregonian* ran over two hundred and fifty articles in an unprecedented exploration of the drug's ravages. Following the cover story in *Newsweek*, a *Frontline* special on PBS, and several cable television documentaries, the United Nations drug control agency in late 2005 declared methamphetamine "the most abused hard drug on earth," according to PBS, with twenty-six million addicts

worldwide. Even as global awareness of the drug grew, meth's association with small-town America remained strongest. The idea that a drug could take root in Oelwein, however, was treated as counterintuitive, challenging notions central to the American sense of identity. This single fact would continue to define meth's seeming distinctiveness among drug epidemics.

In 2005, after six years of trying, I got a contract to write this book under the assumption that meth was a large-scale true-crime story. In that version of the meth story, the most stupefying aspect is the fact that people like Sean could make the drug in their homes. Or that Coco, the Mexican teenager I'd met in 1999, would risk deportation for a fourth time in order to come to Gooding, Idaho, to sell the drug. By 2005, many law enforcement officers were being quoted in newspapers predicting that the state of Iowa would soon take over from my native Missouri as the leading producer of so-called mom-and-pop methamphetamine in the United States. For this reason, and because Sean and James had made it clear that they did not want to be written about, I'd been focusing my research on the state from which half my family comes, and which seemed poised to become the newest meth capital of America. One day, while poring over archived newspaper articles in the *Des Moines Register*, I came across an interesting quote made by a doctor in the northeast part of the state. I called the doctor one afternoon from my apartment in New York City. We talked for an hour and a half, during which the doctor began to change my thinking about meth as a crime story to one that has much more pervasive and far-reaching implications. What struck me most was his description of meth as "a sociocultural cancer." Later that day, I spoke at length to the doctor's twin brother, who was the former county public defender, and then to the assistant county prosecutor. The doctor lived in Oelwein. I made the calls on a Saturday. The following Wednesday, I was driving north on Highway 150, following flights from New York to Chicago to Cedar Rapids.

The doctor's name is Clay Hallberg. Doctor Clay, as he's known around town, is Oelwein's general practitioner and onetime prodigal son. As his father had done before him for forty-five years, Clay has for two decades delivered babies, overseen cancer treatments, performed surgeries, and served as proxy psychologist, psychiatrist, and confidante to Oelwein's wealthy farmers and poor meatpackers, to its Mexicans and Italians and Germans, its Catholics and Lutherans and evangelicals. Oelwein, replete with its humdrum realities and unseen eccentricities, passes daily through Clay's tiny, messy office across the street from Mercy Hospital, one block north of the senior high school. Clay grew up in town and had come back following medical school and a residency in southern Illinois. He raised three children there with his wife, Tammy, all the while living down the street from his parents and his two brothers. Really, I went to Oelwein for the reason that Clay and his hometown seemed inseparable to me, in the same way that hometown America was becoming inseparable with meth. I thought Clay could explain to me how that had happened.

By May 2005, Oelwein was on the brink of disaster. As I stood on First Street in front of the post office, the signs of entropy were everywhere, and hardly less subtle than those in East New York, Brooklyn, or in Compton or Watts, in Los Angeles. The sidewalks were cracked, half the buildings on Main Street stood vacant, and foot traffic was practically nonexistent. Seven in ten children in Oelwein under the age of twelve lived below the poverty line. Up at the four-hundred-student high school, on Eighth Avenue SE, 80 percent of the students were eligible for the federal school lunch program. The principal, meantime, was quietly arranging with the local police to patrol the halls with a drug-sniffing dog—essentially, to treat the high school as a perpetual crime scene. The burned-out homes of former meth labs dotted the residential streets and avenues like open sores. At the same time, the Iowa Department of Human Services, whose in-home therapists serve as one of the only realistic options for dealing with a *mélange* of psychiatric ailments,

drug addiction, and all manner of abuse in Oelwein, was cutting 90 percent of its funding to the town. The meatpacking plant was on the verge of closing its doors. The industrial park sat unoccupied. Unemployment was pegged at twice the national level. For Larry Murphy, Oelwein's embattled second-term mayor, the question was this: How would he keep his town from literally vanishing into the prairie?

The afternoon that I arrived in Oelwein, Clay Hallberg's friend Nathan Lein met me at the Super 8 motel. For forty years, Nathan's parents have farmed and raised livestock on 480 acres north of town. Following law school in Indiana, Nathan returned home to take the job of assistant Fayette County prosecutor. On our way to the police station, Nathan drove by what he described as several working meth labs on the pretty, oak-lined streets that fill out Oelwein's residential neighborhoods, where the hand-laid stone houses date back in some cases 120 years. We passed Amishmen coming to town in their buggies, the Rent-a-Reel movie rental store, and the farm co-op. Two blocks farther on, Nathan pointed out his favorite restaurant, a drive-in burger joint called EI-EI-O's, which had recently closed. On the boarded-up windows, the owner had scrawled in red spray paint, "Make Offer—Please!"

The Oelwein Cop Shop, as the police station is known, is a nondescript 1960s-era brick building by the railroad tracks, one block north of the Chicago Great Western roundhouse. Inside, past the blue-lit dispatch station, Nathan introduced me to the new chief of police, Jeremy Logan. Logan had recently been promoted from sergeant by Mayor Murphy with mandates to clean up a force with a reputation for impropriety and to spearhead a desperate effort to get Oelwein's small-time meth manufacture under control. Sitting in his windowless office wearing a bulletproof vest, Logan scrolled through mug shots of Oelwein's best-known crank dealers and most notorious addicts, one of whom had recently been taken from his home along with fifteen assault rifles and thousands of rounds of ammunition—all while his fifteen-year-old daughter watched.

Many of Oelwein's addicts and dealers, said Logan, hung out at the Do Drop Inn. The idea was that I would go there and, with the blessing of Logan and Nathan Lein, have free range to meet whomever I could. The further hope was that I would get the stories of several addicts and dealers and, with luck, be allowed to follow their lives for the next two years.

It didn't take long. Two days later, I was in the dank living room of Roland Jarvis's small house, watching TV with the shades drawn against the bright May sunlight. Jarvis, a thirty-seven-year-old former meatpacking worker, had just smoked some crystalline shards of crank heated on a small piece of tinfoil, the vapor of which he sucked through a glass pipe. As we settled in for the denouement of the mobster movie *Goodfellas*, Jarvis told his story, principally about the night he blew his mother's house up while cooking a batch of meth. That night had earned him three months in the burn unit at the University of Iowa Hospital in Iowa City, and had melted most of his hands and face off.

Clay Hallberg is Roland Jarvis's doctor. Nathan Lein put Jarvis in jail. On the frigid winter night in 2001 when Jarvis blew up the house, he ran screaming onto the street, begging then-sergeant Jeremy Logan—with whom Jarvis had gone to Oelwein High School in the 1980s—to shoot him. Such was the pain of burning alive. And so, too, is this just a small part of the difficulty caused a tiny rural community by the specter of a drug epidemic, which directs life there in a thousand unseen ways. Nathan Lein and his girlfriend, a caseworker with the Department of Human Services, hardly ever went out to dinner anymore, for fear of seeing people that Nathan had put in jail, or whose children his girlfriend had recommended be taken away by the state. Of Roland Jarvis's four children, one, at thirteen, already needed a kidney transplant, a defect that Jarvis blames on his and his wife's intravenous meth use while the child was in utero. Summing up the damage done to Oelwein one morning at the Perk, Tim Gilson, the former principal of the nearly bankrupt high school, was almost driven to tears re-

membering the harsh metrics of the job from which he'd recently resigned in order to finish his Ph.D. in education. "We just didn't have the money and the staff to help the kids that needed the most of it," Gilson said, describing the events leading up to asking the police to patrol the halls. "On the one hand, I had an obligation to my teachers, who were frightened of their students. On the other hand, is there anything worse than calling the cops on your own children?" He went on, "We're in Iowa, for God's sake. We don't *do* that."

And yet, he did.

The notion that bad things don't—or shouldn't—happen in small towns is not uncommon. What Tim Gilson's disbelief suggests is that nowhere is that conceit more prevalent than in the small towns themselves. By 2005, meth was not just challenging Oelwein's sense of itself; it had destroyed it. Gilson had much from which to draw for his incredulity. That same year, an analysis by Slate.com showed that U.S. newspapers had used the title "Meth Capital of the World" to describe no less than seventy different American towns, cities, states, and counties, from California to Pennsylvania. Several meth-related murders had become national news, most notable the murder of a nine-year-old girl in Cruthersville, Indiana, who'd inadvertently found a neighbor's meth lab and was subsequently beaten to death.

Throughout its history, America has panicked over narcotics perhaps more often and more extravagantly than any nation in the world. Measured by its habitual recurrence, drug addiction is our defining morality play. The first act dates to the late 1700s, when alcohol consumption was blamed for everything from sloth to moral incertitude in the new and largely rural nation. Ever since then, most drugs and drug epidemics have been associated with urban life, whether expressed by the Prohibition raids of Chicago and New York speakeasies, LSD in San Francisco in the 1960s, or Wall Street's and South Beach's cocaine excesses of the 1980s.

What set meth apart was not only the idea that one could make it in the bathtub, but also that the people doing so were poor or working-class rural whites. In that way, the meth epidemic appeared to have neither analog nor precedent in any time since the Revolution.

In truth, all drug epidemics are only in part about the drugs. Meth is indeed uniquely suited to Middle America, though this is only tangentially related to the idea that it can be made in the sink. The rise of the meth epidemic was built largely on economic policies, political decisions, and the recent development of American cultural history. Meth's basic components lie equally in the action of government lobbyists, long-term trends in the agricultural and pharmaceutical industries, and the effects of globalization and free trade. Along the way, meth charts the fears that people have and the vulnerabilities they feel, both as individuals and as communities. The truly singular aspect of meth's attractiveness is that since its first wide-scale abuse—among soldiers during World War II—meth has been associated with hard work. For seventy years, the drug more commonly referred to as crank has been the choice of the American working class. It's in this way more than any other that the story of meth is the story of Oelwein, Iowa, along with that of Roland Jarvis and Tim Gilson and Jeremy Logan. It is also the story of the remarkable, even heroic lengths to which people and communities will go in order to fix themselves.

Some of the deeper meanings of this drug's hold on America had been evident back in 2004, in Greenville, Illinois. Since the farm crisis of the 1980s, many of the farmers there had long since foreclosed on their land. People left in large numbers. According to Sean and James, in nearby Hagarstown, Illinois, there is but one resident who remains. By 2004, many of the employment opportunities in Greenville and the surrounding area were half-time, with no benefits. Out by Interstate 70, just a couple hundred yards from Ethan's Place, there were no fewer than seven major chain motels, none of which contributed more than a few minimum wage jobs to



the town's economy. Greenville, once a proud, vigorous farm town, now depended in part on reluctant passersby moving between St. Louis and Indianapolis in order to survive.

Soon enough on the night that Sean and James played pool with each other, they were talking about job opportunities. There were construction gigs closer to St. Louis, in Belleville, Illinois, or even farther still, forty miles beyond the Missouri line, in St. Charles, sixty miles from Greenville, one way. There was a night-watch job across the street from Ethan's at the Super 8, a position held at the time by a forty-year-old divorced mother of two who was heading to Chicago to try her luck. And there was some work at Wal-Mart. James, who'd entered the Army a grunt and left it six years later a proud staff sergeant, was not enthused by these options.

Sean just laughed. He knew what he was going to do: make meth. The money was good, the drugs were good, and it garnered him access to all kinds of women who, once they smoked a foil or two, would do anything for more. Sean clearly didn't give a shit about the consequences. The way he saw it, life in Greenville was a prison anyway. It was better to live well for a time and go back to jail than to pretend to make ends meet on two hundred dollars a week and no health insurance that Sean said a job at Wal-Mart would get him.

That night, it was unclear whether James was buying it. But it was impossible not to wonder at what point he would start seeing things through Sean's eyes. After all, they'd immediately been able to overlook their immense surface differences: black skin, white skin; shaved head, military crew. On a deeper level, there existed a stronger, and ultimately more enduring, foundation: they were united by history. Life in Greenville had, in the course of their lives, changed fundamentally. And yet here they were together, finally home. If James planned to stay, how long could it be before crank, and Sean, seemed like his best option?

That's not a question I will ever be able to answer directly, for in all the times I've been back to Greenville, Illinois, I've never seen

James or Sean again. The nights I spent talking to them in 2004, though, drove me in my attempt to understand meth in small-town America. Along the way, I began to understand how greatly life in those towns has changed in the past thirty years. Oelwein is a simulacrum for Greenville, and by extrapolation, for the great expanse of the rural United States. Beginning in Oelwein, one can follow meth's currents backward to the thousands of disparate sources from which it flows. From May 2005 until June 2008, I went back many times to Oelwein; I went to California, Idaho, Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, and Missouri, to big cities and small towns alike, in an attempt to put the events in that small Iowa town into some kind of large-scale perspective. Eventually, the story I'd once viewed through the lens of homespun crime became one that stretched from the Czech Republic to China to Washington, D.C., and involved not just addicts and prosecutors and public defenders, but also congresspeople and governors and U.N. officials; neuropharmacologists and macroeconomists; rural sociologists and microbiologists; and drug lobbyists and pharmaceutical company executives.

What it took three and a half years to fully understand (nine if I count back to my trip to Gooding, Idaho) is that the real story is as much about the death of a way of life as it is about the birth of a drug. If ever there was a chance to see the place of the small American town in the era of the global economy, the meth epidemic is it. Put another way, as Americans have moved increasingly to the coasts, they have carried with them a nostalgic image of the heartland whence their forebears came, as worn and blurry as an old photograph. But as the images have remained static, the places themselves have changed enormously in the context of international economics, like an acreage of timber seen in two photos, one in spring, the other in winter. Really, what James and Sean were confronted with that November night back in 2004 was nothing short of finding a place for themselves in a newly unfamiliar world.