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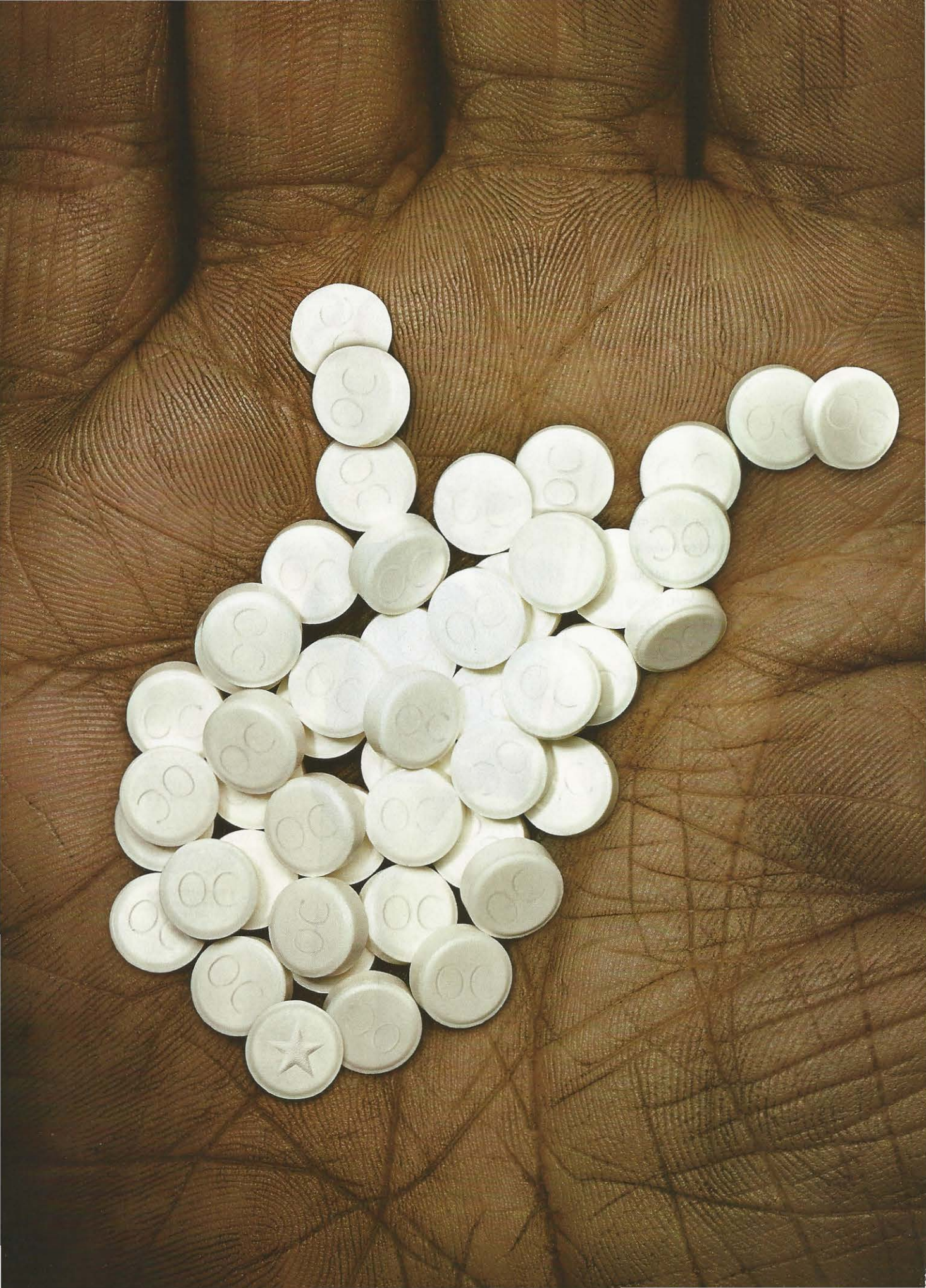

PRESCRIPTION FOR DEATH

HOW PAINKILLERS DESTROYED THE TOWN OF **WAR, WEST VIRGINIA**

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63

John Hatcher is a big guy, six-foot-three and more than 200 pounds. When I met him back in 2011, he was sitting in the fall sunshine on his father's porch in a little town in West Virginia, wearing a blue polo shirt and sporting a neat goatee. All in all, he looked pretty good for a hardcore junkie.

John, then 36, had been hooked for years on prescription pills—mostly painkillers such as OxyContin and Vicodin, opiate-based drugs as potent as their chemical cousin heroin. "I hate being an addict, but I can't shake it," he told me. John hadn't worked in years. He'd stolen from his family to get drug money. He'd once gashed his arm on a nail>>>

WRITTEN BY **VINCE BEISER**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **DAN SAELINGER**

from wrist to elbow and not even noticed because he was so high.

Another time, his father found him overdosed and unconscious on the couch and called for a paramedic, who stabbed John in the chest with a shot of Narcan, right in front of his terrified eight-year-old son.

"He probably wouldn't have survived if I hadn't come home," John's father, Tom, told me then. Tom Hatcher, a silver-haired, ruddy-face gent, was the long-serving mayor of the town of War, named after a settler-Indian battle. We were talking in his cramped office in War's grandly titled City Hall—a three-room former railway station that also houses the town's two-man police department.

War is an impoverished backwater in a narrow valley in deepest Appalachia, a one-time coal-mining hub abandoned by most of the people who once lived there. I was in town to write an article for this magazine about the nationwide epidemic of deaths caused by prescription-pill overdoses.

In the past 20 years, recreational use of pharmaceuticals has skyrocketed across the country, and so have overdose deaths. Prescription pills—especially painkillers—now kill more Americans every year than heroin, cocaine and all other illegal drugs combined. The number of fatal painkiller overdoses has quadrupled since 1999, topping 16,000 in 2010, the most recent year for which statistics are available. And in McDowell County, where War sits, victims are dying faster than just about anywhere else. The overdose death rate there is 16 times the national average.

PRESCRIPTION PILLS NOW KILL MORE AMERICANS THAN ALL ILLEGAL DRUGS COMBINED.

The article I wrote centers on Tom Hatcher's desperate efforts to help both his son and his town. Tom had taken John, along with John's wife, Becky, and their son Jonathen into his home. John promptly stole practically everything of value Tom owned. Tom put John through several rehab programs; none worked. John almost died from overdoses four times. Tom was out of ideas and out of hope. The article ends with him saying, "I think the reality is John will kill himself eventually."

The article sparked a minor ruckus in McDowell County. Lots of folks were upset that Tom had publicly aired the town's dirty laundry—and in PLAYBOY, of all places. The local papers and TV stations all ran stories about my article, ensuring that just about *(continued on page 147)*

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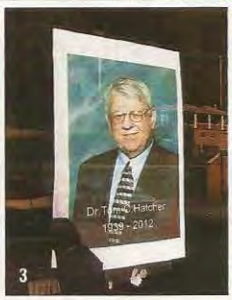
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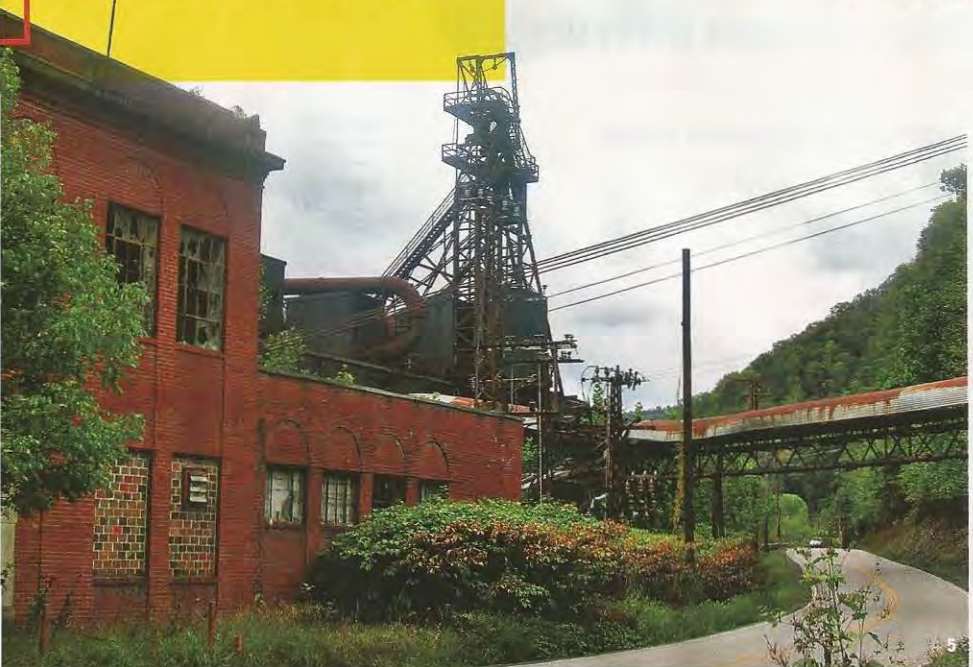
1. Tom Hatcher, mayor of War, West Virginia, in 2011. 2. Tom's daughter-in-law, Becky, with her brother Earl in court. 3. A memorial poster for Tom Hatcher in a Main Street store window. 4. Tom's son, John Hatcher. 5. A derelict coal mine near War. 6. Appalachia in distress: War now has about 1,000 inhabitants, one quarter of its peak population. Drug addiction is epidemic.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everyone in the county heard about it.

A few months later I received a slew of e-mails, Facebook messages and calls from strangers in McDowell County. All of them said basically the same thing: I read your article. You should know what really happened with Tom and John Hatcher.

Here's what happened: John didn't die; Mayor Tom Hatcher did. And two days later, his daughter-in-law, Becky, was charged with his murder.

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War can be a pretty place. The mountains are thick with trees, and in the fall they erupt with splashes of yellow, red and orange. Most of the land is wild and barely populated. But you feel confined nonetheless, always hemmed in by mountains. It's a chore to get to McDowell County and no less of one to leave it.

The McDowell County that Tom Hatcher grew up in in the 1940s and 1950s was very different from today's. The coal industry was booming then. War had movie theaters, restaurants, stores and a sweet shop. "You couldn't drive into town when the Big Creek High football team was playing," recalls lifelong resident Patty Hawkins.

"Back then, War was a nice little town," said Tom's sister, Jerry Lynn Roncella, a no-nonsense high school teacher. She was wearing a lavender hoodie and purple glasses and chain-smoking as we talked at the kitchen table in Tom's house, just outside the center of town, shortly after his death. She was still clearing out the place; it was cluttered with cleaning supplies and Hefty bags half filled with Tom's possessions. "When we were growing up, anybody who drank was looked down on," said Roncella. "And there certainly were no drugs."

Tom went to West Virginia University to get bachelor's and master's degrees and later added a Ph.D. in education. Along the way he got married. The couple adopted three babies through the local Catholic diocese—two girls and John, the youngest. They soon divorced, though. The girls wound up with their mother, and John with Tom.

Tom took a job with a nonprofit organization that brings students and professionals from around the world to the U.S. for cultural exchanges. The job eventually landed Tom and John in Washington, D.C. As John moved into a troubled adolescence, Tom decided the big city wasn't the place for them. In 1991 he moved back to War with his 16-year-old son.

By then McDowell County was skidding downhill. The coal mines had either closed or been mechanized, and most of the miners and their families had moved on. In 1950, when Tom was a boy, nearly 100,000 people lived in the county. He came back to find two thirds of them gone.

Things have gotten worse. War has shrunk to around 1,000 people, one quarter of its peak. The few blocks of low brick buildings that compose War's downtown are a glum procession of empty storefronts, broken windows and caved-in roofs, interspersed with a handful of surviving businesses—including no fewer than three pharmacies. On a window of the War Hotel, the town flophouse, the owners have taped a handwritten sign: NO ALCOHOL OR DRUGS ALLOWED IN THE BUILDING OF ANY KIND. ALL WHO GET COUGHT [sic] WILL GO TO JAIL.

Today, McDowell County is at the bottom of the heap by just about every measure of misery and dysfunction. One third of its inhabitants live below the poverty line. Barely six percent have college degrees. Life expectancy is among the lowest in the nation. The county also has the state's highest rates of teen pregnancy and child abuse.

Tom did everything he could to bolster the place and its people. "When our dad was in the state senate, people would come to our house at all hours, asking for help," recalls Tom's brother, James Hatcher. "Tom had that same commitment. When he came back to War and saw how bad things were, he wanted to help." Tom was active with just about every civic organization within miles, from the Catholic church to the Kiwanis Club and the county historical society. He was elected mayor in 1997 and campaigned to get War a wastewater-treatment plant, a playground and a drug-treatment facility. He also taught at Big Creek High and gave extra tutoring to his students. "I was just a little holler girl everyone figured was going to be a housewife," says Tonya Hagerman, a sharp-faced, cheery young woman. "But Tom saw something else. I'd go to his house every evening and he'd teach me English." Thanks to him, she says, she went on to college and a lucrative career. It wasn't his fault she wound up back in War, where she slipped into a years-long addiction to pills.

Tom was candid about his town's troubles when we met, but he also wanted to make sure I heard about its charms. "I love it here. There's beautiful scenery and great people," he told me. "In spite of it all, I'm very optimistic about this community."

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When John arrived at Big Creek High as a teenager, he quickly fell in with the stoners and troublemakers. "I never even knew what drugs was till I got here to War," John told me. "It didn't take but a week after I got here and it was pills and pot."

John was moving through high school just as the epidemic of painkiller abuse was spreading across the nation. Through the 1990s, regulations controlling such opiates were relaxed, making it much easier to get a prescription. OxyContin, a powerful narcotic later to become famous as "hillbilly heroin," hit the market in 1995. Meanwhile, the FDA cleared the way for pharmaceutical companies to advertise pills on TV and radio, something almost no other country allows. The industry now spends about $3.5 billion every year on ads and promotes its products heavily to doctors. The results have been eye-popping: The number of prescriptions written for opioid painkillers shot from 76 million in 1991 to 219 million in 2011. Narcotic painkillers are now the most-prescribed drugs in the nation, with sales topping $8 billion annually. Today, according to the Centers for Disease

Control, 12 million Americans use prescription painkillers for nonmedical purposes.

Educational campaigns and legal crackdowns galore have been launched in response. The drug industry has been called to account. In 2007 a federal court ordered Purdue Pharma, which makes OxyContin, to pay $600 million in fines for encouraging doctors to overprescribe the drug and for deceiving the public by downplaying the risks it poses. The following year Cephalon paid $425 million to settle a federal investigation into its marketing of a fentanyl-based painkiller. West Virginia is currently suing 14 drug distributors that it alleges have fed illegal painkiller use. "The worst drug dealers are the pharmaceutical companies," says McDowell County district attorney Ed Kornish. "We basically deal with their victims."

Due in part to the high injury rate in coal mining, West Virginians are prescribed more drugs per capita than residents of any other state. Combine all those pills with joblessness and poverty, and you get carnage. Pills spread like a virus from one carrier to the next. Tom kept a list of all the residents of War and its environs killed by drug overdoses. He'd tallied dozens in just a few years.

"Just about everyone I used to party with is dead," says Hagerman. "We're talking about whole families disappearing."

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The next time I saw John was through a thick glass partition inside a state prison. He was locked up in 2012 for forging checks on his father's account. His hair was shaved to stubble, his biceps defined from doing 400 push-ups a day; a fresh homemade tattoo of the word WAR was on his wrist. Despite the tough-guy trappings, he was a welter of misery and confusion, desperately struggling to figure out what to believe about Becky and choking back tears every time his son's name came up.

"Dope has ruined my life. It put me in here, cost my dad his life, ruined my marriage of 14 years, and my son doesn't have a father or mother," he said. "I don't know how much worse it can get."

John was 23 when he started dating Becky Click, a sweet, studious 17-year-old. "Becky was head over heels in love with him," recalls Becky's sister Laura Click. "John had long curly hair then, and she thought he was Prince Charming." A prince with a well-known pill habit. In fact, John gave Laura the first of the painkillers she wound up becoming addicted to. But at the time, Becky wasn't interested. "I could barely get her to smoke a joint," John told me. They were married the next year in War's tiny Catholic church. For their honeymoon John took her to a Ramada Inn in a town an hour away. Jonathen was born a year later. Nothing too strange about that by local standards—Becky's mother had her at 15.

Things went all right for the first few years. The family moved into an apartment in town. Becky went to nursing school while John worked on and off and took care of Jonathen. They had another baby, Ethan, in 2004. John was spending a lot of time partying with friends or just lying around wasted, but it was all more or less manageable.

That changed one day in May 2005 when Becky was at her mother's place in Grundy, Virginia, about an hour from War. Becky lay down on the couch with baby Ethan for a nap. When she woke up, the infant wasn't breathing.

Some people suggest Becky was stoned on pills and accidentally smothered her baby. No way, says John. "Even if she did do this to Dad, she'd never do that to Ethan," he told me. "She was too good a mother. She wouldn't even let me smoke around him."

His son's death caved John's head in. "After we buried Ethan, I really didn't give a shit about life anymore," he said. "I got high as hell on Xanax for three days. I was zombied out right through the wake and the funeral."

Pills took over John's life after that. He'd show up staggering at Jonathen's ball games. Becky would come home to find he'd sold off the dishes, the couch, the rugs, anything he could get a few bucks for. Once, the local cops found him passed out on the street, naked. Becky even left him briefly after he sold a PlayStation she'd bought Jonathen for his birthday.

Becky, of course, was also shattered. "I was worried to death she'd kill herself," says Laura Click. "She didn't want Jonathen out of her sight after that."

Somewhere along the line Becky started taking pills too. She went through a string of jobs at a hospital, an old-age home and a pharmacy in nearby towns. Sometimes she and John would make runs to Florida, home to a thriving industry of "pain clinics" that hand out pills. They'd hit a bunch of different doctors and come home with enough OxyContin and Roxicet to party for weeks and sell the extras.

But most of the time they were broke. Tom tried to help. "He'd set them up with an apartment, but they'd get evicted every time," said Roncella. "Both of them are sorrier than owl manure. They wouldn't work in a pie factory." Eventually Tom wound up taking in all three of them. Before long, his china, silverware and high school graduation ring had disappeared.

By 2011 John and Becky were dragging Tom down with them. In February, Becky was arrested for stealing $125 of church money from Tom's car. She was fined and ordered into six months of drug and alcohol counseling, which she didn't complete. In April, John went crazy one day, throwing stuff around the house and threatening Tom, who was scared enough to call a cop to the house.

Tom paid for John to take one rehab treatment after another, including a stint in a residential program in Arizona. Tom wasn't a wealthy man, and supporting his son's family was slowly bankrupting him. He had to take a second job teaching in War's elementary school.

That's about when I showed up. The day after we'd met in his office, Tom took me out to breakfast at one of the few open businesses on Main Street, a tiny diner decorated with faded pictures of John F. Kennedy. Proprietress Orbie Campbell, still sparky at 77, shuffled out with two plates of eggs and bacon on biscuits without being asked; Tom had eaten there every day for years. "I've threatened many times to put John out," Tom told me, "but that would be punishing my grandson."

"If it all leads to John's death, I'll grieve," he said. "But I don't think I have any control."

John kept getting worse. A month after my visit, Tom again had to call the police to his house. This time John had a knife and was ranting about burning the place down. Then in December he was convicted of forging checks from Tom's account. Tom,

at the end of his rope, had finally pressed charges. But later, ever hopeful, he sent the judge a letter asking him to consider probation. "John, I feel, has learned his lesson," Tom wrote. "Of course, I have said this before and was wrong."

Becky was out of work again by the time John was locked up. She started spending a lot of time in the "casino" that had opened on Main Street, a single crepuscular room curtained off from the street that houses a few video poker machines and a counter selling cigarettes and beer.

Roncella suggested Tom try to get custody of Jonathen. She had done that with her granddaughters after her son died of an overdose. "He said he wasn't sure he could take care of Jonathen by himself," Roncella told me. And there was another issue: "He told me Becky had told him she'd kill him if he took Jonathen away." Tom's longtime friend and co-worker Kitten Cempela says Tom also told her about these threats.

So by June 2012 things were tense between Tom and Becky. That's when Becky's brother Earl Click came home from prison.

Earl is only five-foot-three and 120 pounds but plenty of trouble. As a kid he was so hyperactive he was put on Adderall. By the age of 15 he had pretty much given up on school in favor of smoking weed and popping pills. Like his sister Laura, he was introduced to painkillers by John Hatcher.

How Earl got locked up in the first place is illuminating. On his 18th birthday he was partying on Xanax with a bunch of friends. Literally hours after he had become eligible to be tried as an adult, he and a buddy went into town, sneaked around the back of a pharmacy on Main Street and smashed a window. They climbed in and set about trying to get into the pill-storage area. By the time the cops arrived all the pair had managed to gather was a bunch of cigarettes.

The police took Earl to City Hall and called Tom, who had helped get Earl out of minor legal scrapes before. Earl was so wasted Tom had to slap him to keep him from nodding out. He was soon taken to the hospital to be treated for an overdose.

A few months later, while he was awaiting trial, Earl was at Becky's and got crazy on Xanax again. He took a swing at her, screaming that he was going to kill her and her unborn child. Becky ran out and came back with a cop. Earl socked the cop in the chest, yelling, "I'll fucking kill you!" Becky declined to press charges, but it didn't much matter. Earl was convicted of the break-in and sent to a rehabilitative facility for young adults. He was soon kicked into the regular prison system, however, for fighting with other inmates, saying "Fuck you" to one guard and calling another a fat bastard. He eventually made parole and went home, but his parole was revoked after a few months when he hit his mother in the jaw.

Earl's sentence for the break-in ran out in June 2012. He headed to Grundy, where his mother lives, and moved into a room with his uncle Roy "Donny" Harding at the Appalachian Inn, a cheerless cluster of trailers squatting around an asphalt parking lot. Harding, who had recently been laid off from a coal mine, had spent 10 years in prison on a murder charge back in the 1980s, so he could relate to what Earl was going through.

At the time I'm writing this, Earl is back in jail, awaiting his own day in court for Tom's murder. I met him there in a small, spartan visiting room during a break in Becky's trial. He has sharp blue-gray eyes and is lavishly tattooed but comes across as affable, with a certain goofy charm, even in his orange jumpsuit. "I kind of secluded myself when I got out," he told me. "I was still adjusting from prison."

One thing had changed in a big way, Earl said. "It was like, What happened to Becky? She was the sweet and innocent one who never got in trouble. But when I got out, she was on dope, just chasing pills," he said. "I'd never seen that side of her before."

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On the evening of July 16, 2012, Kitten Cempela got a distraught call from Tom. Someone had used his ATM card to drain his bank account, he said. He was sure it was Becky. "You've got to do something," Cempela told him. Tom said he'd had it and promised to confront her. That night Patty Hawkins, whose house is right behind Tom's, heard Tom and Becky screaming at each other. "He said, 'I prosecuted John and I'll prosecute you,'" Hawkins told me.

The next day, Tom didn't show up to work and didn't call. That was so unusual that Cempela gave her copy of Tom's house key to a couple of city employees and told them to go check on him.

They found Tom in his bed. He was lying on his side, pale and cold, with a livid bruise on his cheek, clutching a long pillow tightly in his arm. A large plastic shopping bag lay behind his head. One of the workers checked for a pulse. There was none.

The workers called the police. Becky and Earl were soon arrested and charged with Tom's murder.

Here's what the police say happened: About one in the morning on July 17, Becky and Earl drove from Grundy to Tom's house in War. There, they suffocated Tom with the plastic bag. They also stole about $1,100 in cash. Around four A.M. Becky dropped Earl back at the Appalachian Inn. Earl told his uncle Donny about the killing, and Donny soon told the police. At a press conference a few days after the arrests, Mark Shelton, then chief of police in War, opined that the money was "most likely" stolen to buy drugs. Tom, it seemed, had become the latest casualty on his own list.

One of the first things I did after learning about Tom's death was write to John in prison. He wrote back almost immediately. "I am absolutely devastated by my dad's murder," he wrote. "I never thought my soon-to-be-ex-wife had that kind of evil in her. This is all my fault. If I hadn't wrote Dad's checks...I would not be in here and would have been able to protect him." He went on: "My father was a great man. He should never have had to go down like this."

Later, when I met him in person, he wasn't so sure. "If Becky did this, I hope she sits in a cell and rots and dies," he said. But over the months, he and Becky had managed to exchange a few letters clandestinely. She said that she loved him and "that she loved Dad, and I'll see when the evidence comes out that she didn't have nothing to do with this," said John. "I don't know what to believe anymore. I really don't."

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I met Becky last spring. The Southern Regional Jail in Beaver, West Virginia, where she was being held awaiting trial, is a low-key lockup. The warden cheerfully agreed to let me visit the same day I called to ask.

Becky was waiting for me in a visiting room furnished with a table and two plastic

chairs. In her mug shot she looked skinny and wild-eyed. She looked better now, even in her jailhouse outfit. She was sturdily built, with a personable smile, her honey-colored hair held back with a narrow headband.

"I'd never hurt Tom," she told me. "He was like my dad. I was closer to him than I was to my dad. If it weren't for Tom I don't know how my son would have turned out, without a male figure in his life." She missed Jonathen intensely. They talked by phone a few times a week, but she didn't like him visiting her. It was too hard watching him walk away. "Tom was grandpa and daddy all in one. I'd never take that from my son." Her voice broke, and she wiped an eye angrily with her finger.

What about her stealing from Tom? That didn't happen, she said. The missing-church-money episode was a mistake—the money was taken by a cousin of hers. And she didn't steal Tom's ATM card or have a fight with him about it.

Did she take pills to get high? "No," she said. "Never." She did take the pain pills she was prescribed when she hurt her knee a few years back. And she did lie about how many she needed so she could get extra for John. And yes, she went with him on runs to the Florida pill mills. But that was it, she insisted.

I'd expected Becky to tell me she hadn't killed Tom, but this denial was surprising. After all, one of her friends, her stepsister, her grandmother, her brother, her sister and her husband had all told me she used pills. Why would John have said that if it weren't true? "I don't know, I really don't," she said. "He's upset with me right now. I think he wants me down at his level."

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Becky's trial began on a chilly, overcast day late last October, in a tiny brick courthouse in Welch, the rundown, half-abandoned county seat a couple of valleys from War. Given McDowell County's size, it was inevitably a bit of a clubby affair; the prosecutor, the lead defense attorney and the judge had all been involved in one or another of John's, Earl's or Becky's previous cases.

District Attorney Ed Kornish, a powerfully built former marine with buzz-cut iron-gray hair, put on a case that relied heavily on circumstantial evidence—but lots of it. One of Becky's cousins and her uncle Donny testified that she had complained bitterly about Tom and had offered to pay them to help her kill him—perhaps jokingly, perhaps not. Other evidence proved that Becky had been stealing from Tom's bank account and using the money to gamble at the video poker parlor in the days just before his death. Patty Hawkins took the stand and recounted hearing Tom screaming at Becky on the night of July 16 that he aimed to prosecute her.

Donny told the court that shortly after midnight on July 17, Earl got a call in their shared room from Becky, telling him to come meet her. Another guy who lived at the Appalachian testified that at about one A.M. he gave Earl a ride to the road that leads to his mother's house, where Earl was picked up by someone driving his mother's car. Several hours later, according to Donny, Earl stumbled back into their room in tears and confessed he had killed Tom. "He said he had to protect his sister," Donny said. The next day, Donny testified, he'd told a tearful Becky what Earl had told him. "She said she couldn't handle it because Tom knew she was there when he died and that she regretted it, but at least she'd have a place to live," Donny told the court.

Several people who had seen Tom the day of the 16th said they hadn't seen a bruise on his face like the one found on his corpse the next morning. Forensics experts affirmed they'd found Becky's fingerprints and spots of Tom's blood on the plastic bag. "In short," Kornish asked the state medical examiner who'd autopsied Hatcher's corpse, "Thomas Hatcher was smothered to death?" "Yes," replied the examiner.

Lead defense lawyer Keith Flinchum's line was simpler: *(concluded on page 153)*

PRESCRIPTION

(continued from page 150)

Tom wasn't murdered at all. He simply died in his sleep of a heart attack. After all, he was 72 years old and plagued with diabetes and badly clogged arteries. The autopsy, Flinchum pointed out, could definitively ascertain only that the immediate cause of his death was asphyxiation, or lack of oxygen. But that could have been caused by his heart giving out. Flinchum put his own forensics expert on the stand to say so. And Becky's mother and 13-year-old sister swore Becky had been in Grundy all that night.

Becky, dressed in a slightly ill-fitting taupe jacket-and-skirt set, took the stand, looking pale and intent. She choked up talking about how Tom was "like a dad" to her. She acknowledged that she'd been stealing money for video poker from him. Everything else, she denied: She insisted she had never asked anyone to help her kill him, had never told Donny she'd killed him herself and had been at her mother's house all through the night that Tom died.

There are several things the jury never heard about. They barely learned anything about Earl and nothing about his criminal history. They didn't hear about Becky's pill use. And thanks to complicated rules of evidence, they never saw, as I did, her videotaped statement to the police after she was first arrested. In that recording she says that at about four A.M. on July 17, she sneaked out of her mother's house to pick up Earl. Earl mysteriously had a lot of cash on him, Becky said, and told her, "All your problems are over now."

That's not an admission of guilt, but it does flatly contradict the alibi she swore to in court.

After the trial was over, while the jury was still out, I went to visit Earl. He surprised me with how tepidly he stood up for Becky. "I know I didn't do it," he said. "I can't vouch for her, because I was at my apartment."

Earl asked me if I thought Becky was guilty. "Honestly, it looks pretty bad," I said. "They have people saying she asked them to help her kill Tom. We know she was stealing from him. They've got a neighbor who said she heard Tom saying he'd put Becky in jail just like he put John in jail. And the very next day, Tom turns up dead."

"Hell of a coincidence, huh?" said Earl.

A few days later, the jury came back with a strange pair of verdicts. On the charge of first-degree murder: not guilty. Apparently the evidence they'd seen wasn't enough to get them past reasonable doubt. There was a second charge as well, however: conspiracy to commit murder. On that one they deadlocked. Becky is slated to face another trial on that count in February.

Meanwhile she's been released on bond. Becky is back in War now, staying at her dad's and spending time with her son, who lives with a foster family. Her new Facebook page carries a message thanking her family and husband for standing by her.

John is up for parole in a few months. Soon, he'll probably be right back where I met him.