



ROBYN MCDANIELS

# METHAMPHETAMINE FOR DUMMIES

POE BALLANTINE

**M**y neighbor, a divorced mechanic who invites kids in and pours them draft beer to increase drug sales and his chances with the girls, offers me my first taste of methamphetamine at age fifteen. He calls it “crank,” like a car part or a grouchy old man. I’ve never snorted anything before. Whiffing something straight up your nose into your brain seems a violation of human dignity, and crank looks nasty, like ant poison and pulverized glass all chopped up on that mirror. It tastes even worse. I try not to cry, the burning pain is so terrible. I

am certain I will sneeze blood all over the curtains, that I’ve done permanent damage. But then comes the *drip, drip, drip*, that bitter, alkaloid savor the meth user learns to associate with pleasure, and I wander around grinding my teeth and feeling like Bruce Lee grafted onto Aldous Huxley for about twelve hours. It takes three days to weather the hangover — the most desiccated and noxiously enervated state I’ve ever experienced. I vow never to do it again (“Never again, never again,” the chant of the meth-head), but do it eight or nine more times. And then,

as if God really loves me, crank vanishes from my neighborhood — and no one misses it.

Ten years later, dead broke, I come back to the old neighborhood to live with my parents for a few months — and to write, I tell people. I've quit school again. Seems the one thing I learned in college is that college is not for me. But I won't be here long. I just want to finish up the novel about the redneck chiropractor with the crystal ball, sell it, make a little cash, and start doing the talk-show circuit. Even though I'm confident of my talent, I suspect that I should've finished school, gotten a degree, woven some sort of safety net, just in case the novel doesn't pan out, just in case I am a sham. But that seems gutless to me, even more gutless than coming home to live with my parents.

The neighborhood hasn't changed much: small, drafty, suburban, ranch-style homes, the Southwestern motif drawn out to the point of absurdity with split-rail fences, wagon wheels, dangling branding irons, and varnished cow skulls. Thrown up in a hurry back in 1957, the houses remind me of the tacky little cottages on miniature-golf courses. Many owners have not made much effort, despite rocketing California real-estate prices, to keep their properties from becoming eyesores. I'm not surprised to see Meuenchau and Coombs just where I left them: sitting in Meuenchau's old pickup truck, smoking homegrown and listening to Leon Russell under the pepper tree. They wave at me, their eyes cheery slits. Howdy boys, I say. What's new? Not a whole lot, I see. How's the bass fishing? All right, just one toke, but then I've got to go. . . .

My parents have always been kind. My mother humors me about my writing ambitions because I'm her son. My father actually seems to understand. He would've been a writer too, but he got waylaid by alcohol and an early marriage and the need to bring home the bacon. Plus he is one of the few people I've met who knows that writing is pure torture, and to grab that diamond you must walk 4,018 miles into hell. He'd rather watch the sprinklers and listen to the ballgame, a glass of German white wine in his hand. He's the only one out of all of us — including me, I have to admit — who believes I will succeed.

Both my parents work, so I have the whole morning and half the afternoon to myself. At last, a chance to write uninterrupted in a quiet house. I spread all my pens and paper out on the dining-room table. My eyes drift toward the newspaper and back. I doodle. I grow drowsy. Five minutes pass. My muses must have gone to the moon. To keep from falling asleep, I write a letter to a friend. Look at the prose explode! And there are so many books to read. I feel undereducated, probably because I keep quitting school, so I drift to the couch and begin to read a novel whose author I admire, or perhaps a neglected volume of history or philosophy, and then maybe just a wee bit of a nap, to let all the teeming ideas soak in.

After a few months of sleeping late, reading on the couch, and writing letters to friends, I decide I'd better get a job. I haven't finished one chapter in the *Redneck Chiropractor Novel*, and I need to stop asking Dad for money. (Can I have five dollars to go to the bar?) The way the neighbors look at me, once a gifted

youth with a ticket out of this working-class neighborhood, makes me feel like a snake in a toilet bowl. Anyway, physical labor is good for the soul. I have fashioned myself after that class of writer who is not afraid to get his hands dirty, who can write about an adz, a pallet jack, or a skip loader without having to look them up in the dictionary.

Coombs and Meuenchau work in the barrio on Logan Avenue, not far from downtown San Diego, in a chemical warehouse where just about anyone can get a job, including me. Coombs and I are "parts pullers." We're handed a phoned-in requisition from a "parts retailer," and we fill a plastic crate with car wax, Marvel Mystery Oil, fuel filters, brake fluid, engine starter, and the like, then drop it off and pick up the next requisition. Meuenchau delivers these "parts" to the various retailers. The days go by fast enough, but by the time I get home, the sun is almost gone, and I'm too tired to write. Still, hard work feels good. I feel "real" again. I don't have to ask Dad for money. The next-door neighbor pounds me fraternally on the back, and I sit in a lawn chair in his driveway, smelling the oil that drips from his Ford Ranchero and hoping his daughter will come out in her terry shorts as we lament (as every generation has since the advent of language) the brevity of the days and the general decline in morality. And I'm writing all this down in my head, don't you fret: it's the *Chemical Warehouse Novel*, a real blue-collar gem.

Coombs grew up four houses down from me. A runty high-school dropout with tousled blond hair and a sharp Adam's apple, he has, I believe, some sort of undiagnosed Tourette's syndrome, but he's too poor, simple, and uncaring to do anything about it. (Until the last twenty out of a million years of human history, our "neurological disorders" were simply our personalities.) Coombs is inclined to violence and has a variety of tics. He claps, hops, and hoots. He screeches, coughs, barks, spits, grunts, gurgles, clacks, hisses, whistles, whoops, gives you the finger, wants to arm-wrestle you (he's very strong), and finishes your sentences in a ghostly mumble that makes it seem for a moment as if he is reading your mind. I remember him in his baby carriage. I remember him catching me on the way to school one morning and showing me an Irish setter that had hung itself by jumping, still hooked to its leash, over a brick wall. Here he is at ten years old drinking from a bottle of Ten High bourbon on the couch in a ramshackle gas-and-chicken-smelling house piled high with furniture and trash, his mother in her muumuu glued to the tv. As I recall, he began smoking pot in second grade. Marijuana ameliorates his symptoms, turns his jerking and swearing into squirming, giggling, blank stares, and occasionally pithy observations, such as "Why do people have hair?"

Meuenchau, twenty-nine, lives with his mother on the next block over. (His father died of cancer a few years ago.) He is slump shouldered and reed thin, his eyes narrow slits in a Slavic face so thick it looks like a mask, his receding hair tied in a ponytail that hangs down his back. Calm and steady as a tortoise, he hasn't had a girlfriend since he was eighteen. He likes to sleep, smoke dope, and boat-fish for bigmouth bass.

After work I drink a beer or two, have dinner with my

parents, and watch or listen to the ballgame with my father, who by then has advanced himself to that insensate state he manages to achieve most every night. I scribble a note or two on the novel ("Ramon drove the forklift, blades raised, into the second deck"), then grow restless, loins astir, my warehouse-hardened muscles taut, my youthful thirst in need of slaking. I walk past suburban windows revealing warm life inside and end up on the next street over, where Meuenchau and Coombs sit in the blue homegrown haze of Meuenchau's Ford truck cab. I slide in, open a beer, take a hit. We share the threads of our bottom-of-the-world tapestry: back orders; a busted vat of lethal carburetor dip; Barry pinned by a runaway pallet of Pennzoil, two ribs broken. They're content with work, sleep, dope, and Jack-in-the-Box burgers. They have no fear of dying and leaving nothing. Time is a sort of funny, irrelevant gas. Marijuana supplants the need for sex. Myself, I've got work to do, dreams to cash in. I can't get derailed again. Even high, I know I'm running out of time. Pretty soon I'm going to start that novel. See you bright and early in the morning, fellows.

**A**bout this time Javier Medina — another old neighbor, and an ex-heroin addict with federal-pen time and gang activity on his résumé — makes a surprising reappearance. Honestly I never thought I'd see him again. It's been five years since he disappeared. But the news is he's kicked the habit and wants to start over, reenter this dispiriting suburban theater we call "society." I have to say he looks good, like the old Javier, a track star and varsity-basketball player. And he's got a heavysset Boston honey with messed-up teeth named Flora. She seems homey and solid, the kind of maternal influence a guy teetering on the edge might need. I've always liked Javier. He has a nimble mind and is a font of quaint expressions and dirty jokes. ("What's the difference between an epileptic oyster shucker and a prostitute with diarrhea?") Standing over a charcoal grill, he twirls his spatula and announces, "If it's smoking, it's cooking; if it's burning, it's done!" He can quote Tom Waits lyrics by the ream. And though he appears to be a hard case, the sort of gnarled chap you'd expect to see snarling in a federal cage (no one around here even thinks about fooling with him), I've never found a reason to dislike him.

All Javier needs now, besides the willpower to resist temptation, is a job. Not an easy thing to come by for an ex-heroin addict with a criminal record who hasn't officially worked in three or four years. The answer, of course, is the chemical warehouse; they're always hiring. I put in a good word for him, and he's on the payroll. Javier throws himself into his work, filling crates with oil, air, and fuel filters. Whether or not I've done him a favor remains to be seen.

Meuenchau and Coombs have moved out of the truck and now spend their evenings inside Javier's home, where there's a fridge to keep your beer cold, flat surfaces on which to roll your doobies, better speakers for your Moody Blues, and an address to which pizza can be delivered. Javier has known these boys all his life. He's exactly Meuenchau's age. They were in the same grade in school until Meuenchau fell behind and then eventually quit. I worry a bit that they might be a bad influence on

Javier, but he will have to weather stronger temptations, and I understand that a little pot is probably a good thing. As long as a needle doesn't appear, what's wrong with a party? No one is telling the ex-junkie that he must wear a straitjacket and sit on a wooden pew reciting the names of flowers for the rest of his life.

Meuenchau and Coombs seem motivated by their new relationship with our resurrected comrade: more intent, harder working, less trivial. They are suddenly concerned about such matters as the new shipping-and-receiving table and whether or not an order goes out on schedule. They might even be a little rushed and agitated at times. I find the change, if not refreshing, then at least interesting. I ignore some obvious signals: the dilated pupils, tense jaw muscles, constant sniffing, and faraway looks. (Note also that Coombs's Tourette's symptoms have all but disappeared, and Meuenchau, practically as sexless as they come, has begun talking seriously about *girls*.) But I'm convinced it's their new indoor life, Mama Flora's homemade navy beans with ham and Boston cream pie, and Javier's fine example that have inspired them to some sort of self-improvement.

After work one night I stroll down to the Medina house, open the gate, appease the affable golden pound dogs, Pancho and Claude, and knock on the door. Flora answers, eyes shining, chin thrust aerodynamically forward, a feather duster in her right hand. She seems highly animated and flushed, as if from exertion. By her reaction to me, I might be her missing millionaire uncle. "Hey, man," she pants, shaking the feather duster at me. "Come on in."

Oh, a party. Hello, everyone. "Get him a beer, Flora," Javier calls. I ease into the living room and find him barefoot in his recliner, singing along with Dan Hicks's "I Scare Myself." Coombs is leaning intently over the coffee table, slowly tearing the pages from a hot-rod magazine. Meuenchau, smoking stoically in the rocking chair, might be the Polish Marlboro Man. Flatmo, whom I went to high school with, stands in the corner in a leather jacket, long black hair flattened and sliced down the middle, a shine on his boots, jabbering at a girl I've never seen before who has the hollow-eyed aspect of a bandit. Flora, having gotten me a beer, has resumed dusting the hearth. Against the wall, beneath a painted-by-numbers *Blue Boy*, sits a nice-looking girl with daffodil hair and serene satin gray eyes. Looks like Dawn Fairburn from long ago. My word, it *is* Dawn Fairburn. What are *you* doing here?

*(end of excerpt)*