

Dark Crystal

Meet three young people who got swept up in meth madness.

By Julie Mehta

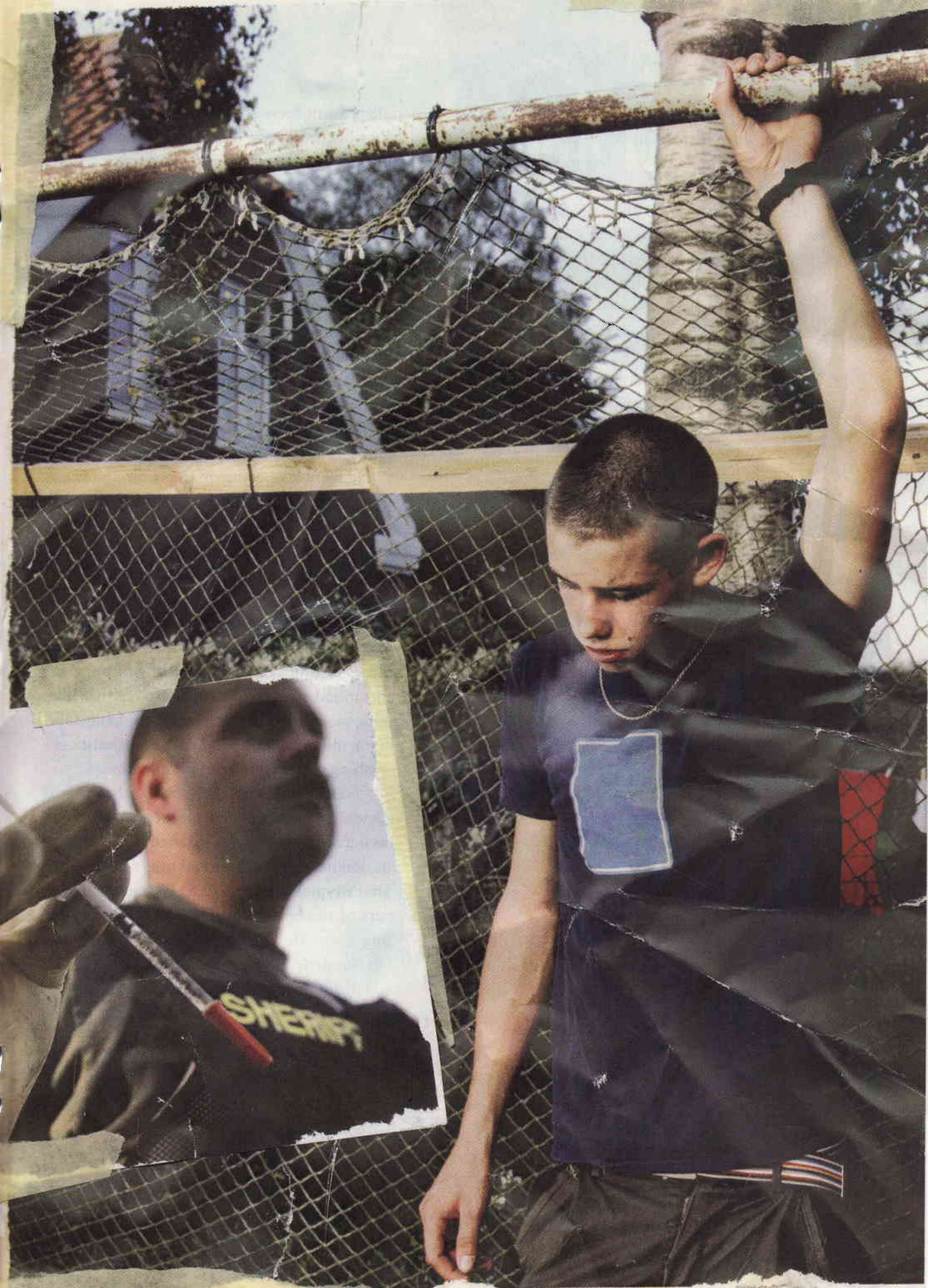
The last thing Lauren wanted to be was a crystal meth user. “I knew all my friends were using it, and I was against it because I saw what it did to them,” the 17-year-old says. But about two years ago, Lauren and some friends were driving around their Kansas farming community, bored and looking for something to do. They stopped on a back road, and Lauren’s friends started smoking meth. Her boyfriend put it to her lips and pestered her to try it. Finally Lauren gave in. “It was mind-blowing,” she recalls. “I felt weightless and had a smile from ear to ear. I was addicted right after that first time.”

That day Lauren fell victim to a drug whose use has spread like wildfire. Nationwide, fewer teens have tried methamphetamine than marijuana. But Richard Rawson, a professor at the

University of California, Los Angeles, who is involved with the school’s Methamphetamine Treatment Project, says, “In the western U.S. and in many rural communities, meth is a huge problem. Because of the [drug’s] cheapness and availability . . . kids can get it very easily.”

Dangerous Rush

Meth goes by several street names—speed, crank, ice, crystal, chalk, and zip—and looks deceptively harmless. The drug can be smoked, injected, snorted, or swallowed. Regardless of how it’s taken, meth has the same basic effect. Meth is often referred to as the “poor man’s cocaine” because, like cocaine, it is a central nervous system stimulant. Users



say they take meth to increase their energy or to heighten their focus on tasks.

"Meth makes you feel more powerful, like you can do anything," says 17-year-old Chris from Nashville. "I was on the debate team in school and getting good grades and had two jobs, but it was a short-term fix."

Chris started taking meth to study for a test or to stay up all night playing video games. Soon he was getting only six hours of sleep a week. He spent most of his time hunting for more meth. "I'd done other drugs to have a good time," he says. "I had to take meth just to maintain my day."

An Old Drug

In the 1930s, amphetamines were a common ingredient in diet pills. But the drug turned out to be addictive and had serious side effects.

The U.S. government banned almost all medical use of amphetamines in the 1970s. Today meth is legally available only in small prescribed doses to treat conditions such as *narcolepsy* (a sleep disorder). But organized-crime groups and

independent "cooks" produce potent street versions of the drug in illegal labs. "Meth now is much more powerful—probably two or three times as strong—because the production process has been refined," observes Steve Hedrick of the California Methamphetamine Strategy, a campaign to combat the drug's use.

Lauren says that many of her own friends cooked meth in open fields. She blames small-town boredom for meth's popularity in her community. Even her own parents were users, says Lauren. "Meth overran my town."

Losing Control

Amber was only 12 when she first tried meth. "I had trouble opening up to people and was a loner," reveals Amber. "Meth made me get out of my shell. I didn't want the feeling to go away." Soon, though, her feelings changed.

Meth works by stimulating the brain to release *dopamine*, a chemical associated with feelings of pleasure. Because meth takes users so high, they have a long way to fall. "Meth causes erratic sleep patterns, loss of appetite, and mood swings," says Rawson. "[It's] like someone who is bipolar, swinging from talking a mile a minute and being optimistic to crashing and feeling tired and depressed."

And it takes more and more of the drug to get the same high. "At the beginning I was taking one pill," says Amber. "But then I started needing a whole vial to get the effect." That's typical, according to Rawson. "In one part of the brain, you become more tolerant

Foul Brew

Meth is manufactured in illegal labs, using a variety of toxic chemicals. Check out some of the nasty ingredients that end up inside meth users' bodies.

Battery acid
Brake cleaner
Drain cleaner
Ether
Fertilizer
Iodine
Kerosene
Lye
Paint thinner



and need more meth,” he explains. “In another area, you become sensitized, so less is needed to produce fear and paranoia.”

Rawson says users may start “tweaking”—fixating on one task to the exclusion of others. That’s what happened to Chris. “I would clean and reorganize my room over and over,” he says. “If I scratched out a word in my homework, I’d rewrite the whole page, so it would take me four or five hours to do something I [used to] do in an hour.”

Some users feel like bugs are crawling under their skin, so they may pick at it until it bleeds. Lauren’s hair began to fall out when she used meth. But it was the changes in her friends that scared her the most. “They were completely different people on meth,” Lauren says. “They looked like skeletons.”

Long Road Back

Recovery can be tough for many meth users. Bingeing on those feel-good chemicals can hurt the brain’s ability to make more of them, so meth addicts often deal with depression for several months after stopping. They also suffer from memory loss.

“Ice’ has a Swiss-cheese effect on the brain,” says Jill Wojcik, clinical director of the Bobby Benson treatment center in Hawaii, where meth abuse has long been a problem. “The adolescents [in treatment] can’t think in abstract ways. We can’t talk to them in long sentences, because it confuses them.”

Amber, now 17, is finally off meth and learning to accept who she is without the drug. Lauren has gotten treatment. Still, she wishes she’d never messed with meth. “I hurt a lot of people I care about,” she says. “I did a lot of things that, if I could take back, I would.”

For Chris, recovery has been about being honest with himself. “One of the biggest things for me is being comfortable with who I am,” he says. “Now I want to improve myself, and I didn’t care about that before.” **CH2**

Meth Mouth

Meth can cause plenty of serious physical damage, but one of its most embarrassing effects is “meth mouth.” That’s what dentists call the gray-brown, twisted, and mushy teeth of regular meth users. Experts believe the drug ravages teeth by drying up saliva and leaving users with dry “cotton mouths.”



AP/Wide World Photos

Without saliva, bacteria in the mouth multiply, leading to decay. Dry mouth also makes users crave sugary drinks, which exacerbate the damage. Because meth makes users feel agitated and jumpy, they are prone to grinding their teeth.

Dentists report that healthy teeth can become rotten from even a few months of meth use. Treating meth mouth often means pulling teeth and inserting costly implants. One dentist says that a severe case of meth mouth forced him to outfit a 17-year-old meth user with dentures.



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meth

To learn more about meth abuse, go to www.teens.drugabuse.gov and search for the word *meth*.