

# Shooting Star

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BY DAVID HOLTHOUSE



*The Meat Puppets: Derrick Bostrom, Curt Kirkwood, and Cris Kirkwood; photograph by Joseph Cultice*

The phone is no friend of Curt Kirkwood's.

Too often, the tidings it bears are foul. He calls them "incomings from Tempe." They go like this: Your brother's wife overdosed this morning; she's dead. Your brother got busted again last night, and he told the cops he was you. Your brother showed up at my house yesterday with a crack pipe and a bag of needles, and he looks like hell. Your brother took off from rehab. Your brother's holed up in a Motel 6 on the Black Canyon Freeway, smoking rock like it's judgment day.

Born in Texas, raised in Sunnyslope, Ariz., Curt and his brother Cris became the most famous modern rock stars ever from this desert metropolis. Curt played guitar and wrote a lot of songs. Cris played bass and wrote a few. When they sang together, the Kirkwoods were purposefully seldom in tune. Yet as the lens of retrospection contracts, their band, the Meat Puppets, is viewed as one of the most influential groups of the past two decades of rock music.

Six months before he committed suicide, Nirvana superstar Kurt Cobain cited the Meat Puppets as a primary source of inspiration. All at once, the Meat Puppets were lifted from underground heroes to certified-gold recording artists by sales of their 1994 album *Too High to Die*. That title now haunts the band.

Curt says the last time he saw Cris, his brother was probing inside an abscess on his stomach with a needle, searching for a vein. This was in mid-August, three days after Cris' wife, Michelle Tardif, had died of an overdose in the master bedroom of their Tempe home, where the two had been holed up for months. It was Cris who found her body. He had been passed out in the living room, and when he came to in the early afternoon, Michelle had been dead for hours. Cris called the band's manager in Austin, then fled the house before police arrived. He may have run because he had felony drug warrants out for his arrest, or because he cracked up, or both.

Regardless, according to his brother and close friends in the Valley, Cris Kirkwood is lurching pell-mell toward the reaper, track-marked arms open for the embrace. He's smoking cocaine and shooting heroin in death-wish quantities. Overweight from binging on Ben & Jerry's ice cream, he's pocked with the sores and boils that result when a junkie misses a vein and shoots impure, infectious heroin directly into muscle tissue. After numerous, futile attempts to convince Cris to step back from the abyss, Curt now seems resigned to his brother's fate. He describes Cris as "a suicide in progress." The two haven't played music together for almost three years.

"Basically, we have a nonfunctioning member of our organization," says Curt, who has lived in Austin since 1997 and recently acknowledged that his local outfit, which had previously gone under the moniker of the Royal Neanderthal Orchestra, is now the Meat Puppets. "My brother is on all the Meat Puppets records up to this point, so he's still a Meat Puppet. He's just a Meat Puppet in outer space. I can't say he's in the band when he doesn't know what fucking day it is."

The Meat Puppets were always a drug band. But they were known for pot and acid, not coke and heroin. There's a world of difference. Rare is the pothead who picks through the fibers of his living-room carpet for hours, looking for a tiny nugget, or the acid eater who finds himself paging a dealer at 4 a.m, jonesing for another hit. Curt, at 39 the elder of the two brothers by a year, says he misspent a few nights of his youth staying up all night, snorting coke. He also says both he and Cris toyed with heroin in their early 20s. But all that was over years ago, and neither of them ever spun out like Cris has now. Not even close. Efforts to locate and interview Cris Kirkwood for this story were unsuccessful. Friends haven't seen him since a few days before Halloween.

Curt says drugs began taking control of Cris about four years ago. The Meat Puppets were playing sold-out stadiums nearly every night, opening for the Stone Temple Pilots, whose lead singer, Scott Weiland, developed a heroin addiction that soon would be chronicled. *Too High to Die* had been out for almost a year, and for the first time, the Meat Puppets had a hit single, "Backwater," all over

MTV and commercial rock radio. Alongside the rush of overdue fame, the Meat Puppets were suddenly making serious money. The members of Stone Temple Pilots were already multi-millionaires.

"All that loose dough brought out the weasels," says Curt. "I observed the weasels, and learned their ways. Wherever you are, the weasels find you after the show, and push really good dope in your face."

The partying on that tour was epic. Curt tells of many nights when a weasel would slit open a corner of an ounce bag of cocaine — \$900 worth — then squeeze the contents out like frosting into one big line and set down a box of straws.

"It was Hollywood Babylon at its finest worst. The refuse of that tour is still floating around, in the form of Scott Weiland and my bro."

Cris Kirkwood was high on heroin and catatonic in the studio during the early 1995 recording sessions for *No Joke*, the first Meat Puppets record after *Too High to Die*, and the last one they made. The hype preceding *No Joke*'s release in the fall of 1995 was acute. The album was good, but doomed. The band's record label eviscerated promotions of *No Joke*, including a video, and canceled support for a national tour when they learned Cris was riding the needle.



photograph by Joseph Cultice

"My brother cost himself, me, and [Meat Puppets drummer Derrick] Bostrom millions of dollars," says Curt. "His drug abuse was this band's only catastrophe. The record company had big, high hopes for our last album, but when they saw the internal problems, they decided to cut their losses. I don't really blame them. It just got away from us, because I wouldn't let him go. Our managers at

the time [Gold Mountain, which also managed Nirvana] knew all about this kind of shit, and they were not fucking into it at all.

"They told me to get him out of the band, and I wouldn't because he was my brother. I figured he might pull his head out with the album going down the tubes, but he didn't."

Rock-star meltdowns have swirled around Curt Kirkwood without pause for years now, poisoning the air inside his bubble of hard-won success. Before the Meat Puppets toured with Stone Temple Pilots, they went on the road with chart darlings Blind Melon, whose lead singer, Shannon Hoon, overdosed on cocaine inside his tour bus and died. In November 1993, the Kirkwoods appeared onstage with Nirvana for the live recording of the Seattle band's legendary MTV *Unplugged* concert, performing three songs from their 1984 album, *Meat Puppets II*, a landmark in American indie rock.

Kurt Cobain had asked the Puppets to open a series of huge shows on Nirvana's *In Utero* tour, and when *Too High to Die* came out in early 1994, around the time MTV first aired the *Unplugged* concert, its packaging included a sticker with a quote from Cobain: "The Meat Puppets gave me a completely different attitude toward music. I owe so much to them." Cobain barely survived a heroin overdose in March 1994, shortly before the Meat Puppets were supposed to meet Nirvana in Prague for a European tour. Those plans were trashed, and Cobain killed himself a month later.

"Cobain was a lot of fun to hang out with," Curt says. "I always enjoyed talking with him. We were supposed to meet up with him in Europe, but he was hiding out, killing himself. I don't know what the hell's going on, but it seems like in the past four years way too many people around me with good things happening for them have gone fuckin' belly-up. They all turned themselves into floaters."

One of the last interviews Cris Kirkwood gave to a writer for a major publication was in August 1994, for a story on the band that appeared in the *Boston Globe*.

"Rock star opulence has, seemingly, not set in," wrote the *Globe's* pop critic, Jim Sullivan. "Right now, Kirkwood's main concern, as he's talking on a Chicago pay phone, is to avoid being busted. 'There's this big, huge undercover cop who's been staring at me for 15 minutes,' Kirkwood whispers." Sullivan asked Cris if he had cause to worry. "I'm clean enough as long as he doesn't look in my pockets." Sullivan then asked Cris to compare playing arenas with the Stone Temple Pilots to playing clubs in the past. Cris responded: "I'm just so damaged, I can't remember the past. I have nothing to compare it to. You tell me. How was I? How am I? Who am I? Are you my mommy?"

Cris was flaunting his new toy. Presumably, he still knew who his mother was — Vera Pearl Renstrom, daughter of the late Omaha inventor and millionaire Carl W. Renstrom. The Kirkwoods'

grandfather founded Tip-Top Products, a multinational company that made plastic hair curlers he invented, among other products (including barbed-wire throwers during World War II). Carl Renstrom died in 1981 at the age of 79. Vera Pearl died of cancer in December 1996 in a Phoenix hospice. She was 59. Her will divided her estate evenly between Curt and Cris, placing a second small fortune atop the one they already had made for themselves.

"The doctors never were sure exactly what killed my mom, but I'd say it was probably hard living," says Curt. "She always partied like a motherfucker. It runs in the family."

Vera started a Southwest-style furniture store in Scottsdale, Su Casa, in 1987, and made frequent buying trips to Mexico, even after cancer began to consume her. Vera's vibrating personality got her marked as a rich eccentric.

"Anyone who knew my mom will tell you she's one of the craziest fuckin' people they ever met," Curt says. "But she'd run circles around everybody. She didn't need anything from anybody. She was doing them favors all the time. Odd as she may have been, my mom was a beautiful and energetic woman. She was just really hard to follow in a conversation."

Curt laughs and sips a Beck's. He all but quit drinking earlier this year, and one beer lasts him an hour.

"Psychiatrists said my grandfather wouldn't have been such a bitch if he was on lithium, at least. There's always been a demon, and a real heavy one, in my lineage. My mom had it, and I think my bro got it from her."

Although Cris and Curt have the same father, their mother was married six times. "When I was a sophomore in high school, my mom and stepdad at the time had a row, and lit fire to our house, and it burned," says Curt. "He just immolated our whole fucking existence. And it was a big deal in my neighborhood, because people already knew how fucked my family was. That was the second husband she had in that house who beat her. I took my mom to the hospital to get sewn up half a dozen times before I could legally drive.

"Crazy, bad shit like that crosses all cultural and economic boundaries. It doesn't matter how much money you have, the insanity will get in there."

Curt looks different when he talks about his brother. He looks tormented. Wized. For a change, he looks his age. He wears glasses now. Big, black, Buddy Holly frames. And his untamed hair, which used to cascade from his shoulders to his abdomen, has been cut short, into a kinetic, black ball around his head. The first few streaks of gray have appeared. Curt says watching your brother shoot up into an open sore will do that.

He spends most of his days hanging out in his rehearsal space and newly outfitted recording studio, within the catacombs of the Austin Rehearsal Complex. His space there is a sanctuary. There's no phone. Some days, Curt jams, some days he writes songs. He says he's writing some of his best ever these days. Some days Curt records, some days he just sits around with the guys in his new band, Kyle Ellison, Andrew Duplantis, and Shandon Sahn, and draws cartoons.

Curt was going to be an animator before he became a rock star, and his artwork has graced the covers of most Meat Puppets albums. The wall above one of two couches in his studio space is covered with artwork, much of it Curt's, most of it profane. Curt's favorite character right now is the Wandering Klown, a stick figure wearing a dunce cap who is a most randy harlequin. In one piece, the Wandering Klown sodomizes Hitler.

When Curt is able to clear his mind of trouble, to forget about Cris just for a little while, the transformation is remarkable. When he puts on a tape of his new music, takes off his glasses and closes his eyes, he looks for a while to be at peace. When he spontaneously dances a mad jig in his faded jeans and burnt-orange cowboy boots, declaring "this is some Lord of the Dance shit," or stalks a fly for 10 minutes before he snatches it from midair, Curt's eyes are bright, his face smooth, his limbs loose. He looks like he did and should. Intense. Free. Weird. And loving it. But always, the pall settles back over him like a shroud.

"I hope the record company gets my ass busy, soon," he says. "I don't want to sit around, thinking about all this awful shit every day anymore."

No, he says, he doesn't want to talk about his brother's late wife.

"I'll just spit vitriol. I'll say this much: She was a groupie. Also, I always thought she'd kill my brother first. Beyond that, I don't believe she deserves any coverage, to be quite honest. If she's out there in ghost land right now, and she knows you're doing this article, she's laughing. She's going, 'Fuck, this is so perfect.'"

Michelle Tardif was born in the province of Quebec, March 1962. She was 36 when she died, two years younger than Cris. Curt says he and his brother first met her after a Meat Puppets concert in Toronto, sometime in 1985.

"She used to come to all our shows up there and just try and hang out with the band," remembers Curt.

When Tardif moved to Tempe in 1988, Curt says it was like she "just descended from the clear blue." Tardif spoke with a French-Canadian accent and was physically attractive before drugs turned her into a scarecrow. She was tall, 5'9", with the eyes to match her long brown hair. Her father was a surgeon, and she traveled throughout Europe with her mother as a child and young

teen. After she graduated from high school in Montreal, she enrolled at Concordia University, also in Montreal, to study literature.

Tardif's mother, Simone, says Michelle met an older Greek filmmaker who was teaching at Concordia's film school, and followed him back to Europe when she was 18. She modeled in Paris for about three years, then returned to Montreal and finished her degree. Simone Tardif says her daughter told her a few months before she died that she began doing heroin in Montreal following her return from France, but didn't let heroin start doing her until she moved to Arizona, where cocaine and heroin come cheap and easy, one stop from Mexico.

Among the Kirkwoods' close friends in Tempe and Phoenix, Michelle Tardif is not remembered with fondness. They say she was combative, in your face, and behaved as if she were on camera most of the time. Curt still calls her "queenie," and remembers her pulling a chair from beneath a 10-year-old girl at a party "just because she could."

"I don't think anyone ever figured out exactly what Michelle's deal was," says Curt. "She always just seemed really out of place, and trying way too hard to compensate. She was just heinous with that mouth. Her whole deal was, 'Here I am. Now, deal with me.' She was just so, so punk rock all the time. ... She set her sights on my bro, who's always been weak where women in his life are concerned."

Cris had had a junkie girlfriend once before. Curt says his brother saved her life when she overdosed on heroin in a Tempe home the brothers shared. The three of them had been doing heroin together, and Curt was in the living room when his brother yelled from the bedroom that his girlfriend was dying. Curt took one look at her, dialed 911, then went into his room, closed the door, plugged in his guitar, turned the amp way up, and started to wail.

"This was back when I had long, blue hair and did dope," Curt says. "I didn't know how it all turned out until this lady cop walked into my room. My brother had given her CPR and kept her alive until the paramedics got there, and she made it. I think it was about then me and my bro decided it was time to edit drugs out of our lives. The truth is, Cris and me, our lives were always rife with drug abuse — our own and others' — so it's no wonder one of us wound up fucked, really. Still, my bro and I conscientiously stopped shooting up dope more than 10 years ago. I thought we'd come out the other side unscathed.

"The ironic thing about Cris being all wiped out is, I was always the crazy one. I was the one who got all fucked up on drugs in high school. My mom used to have to send him to come get me, because I'd get too dusted and not know where I was. That was 20 years ago. Same locales, though. Same fuckin' places. He had to come scrape me off the floor one time from a place in Tempe just around the corner from the house where he lived with Michelle, and that was back when

Tempe was a long way from Sunnyslope. He was pissed that time. He was like, 'Mom made me drive all the way down here, you stupid motherfucker. I hope she kills you.'"

Curt puts a flame to an American Spirit cigarette and bends forward to rub his temples. He exhales blue smoke through his knees, then looks up and leans back.

"The other anomaly here is, I always thought the Meat Puppets were a relatively stable band. Cris and I would sit back and watch our friends in the Butthole Surfers or the Chili Peppers or Nirvana or whoever dealing with serious drug problems in the band, and we'd go, 'Wow, through the grace of God, we're doin' all right. We're 12, 13, 14 years old as a band, and we're doing better and better, and none of us are junkies.' We were congratulating ourselves on negotiating the minefield when Cris went boom."

Michelle Tardif and Cris Kirkwood were married in February 1995; Curt wasn't invited. Michelle began introducing herself as "Mrs. Meat Puppet." The couple became known for throwing intense, all-night parties, where Michelle would make the rounds in her lamb's wool jacket, literally pushing pills on people. After Cris returned from the Stone Temple Pilots tour with a significant cocaine and heroin habit, the couple became increasingly reclusive.

"They fed on one another," says Curt. During early 1995 recording sessions for *No Joke*, Cris was a mess. Butthole Surfers guitarist and band friend Paul Leary, who produced *Too High to Die*, was back at the console for the follow-up. Curt says he and Cris were fighting like pit bulls over Cris' drugging, his marriage, "basically his whole fuckin' deal."

"At first, Paul was like, 'This is some brother bullshit you need to put in a drawer until we finish this record.' Then, after a few days, he came up to me like, 'You know, I think Cris might have a drug problem.' Meanwhile, Cris is nodding out with his bass in his hands, and I'm like, 'You think so?'"

By mid-1995, Michelle and Cris rarely came out of the house. They had their drugs delivered, and when no dealer would return their pages, one of them, usually Michelle, ventured forth to score on the street. On September 11, 1995, Michelle was stopped by police in a crack-ridden neighborhood near downtown Phoenix. She was driving her husband's Infiniti G20; car-wash employee, crackhead, and part-time heroin dealer Johnny Louis Johnson was in the passenger seat.



photograph by Todd V. Wolfson



According to a police report, Michelle told the officer that she was in the neighborhood to buy drugs, and produced five pieces of heroin wrapped in foil. She told him she was a journalist writing a book about homeless drug dealers. The cop searched Johnson, turned up a bag of crack, and arrested them both for possession of narcotics. Johnson later told a probation officer Michelle was "a rich white woman who came to the area often to buy drugs. She usually got other people to get drugs for her. On this day, he was the only one out on the streets, so she approached him and gave him \$60 to buy drugs. He returned to her car with five hits of heroin he bought for \$50. She then gave him five \$1 as a tip."

Michelle gave her probation officer this account of recent history: "In the fall of 1994, [Tardif] says she began visiting the homeless people in downtown Phoenix to observe them and gather facts for a story. She befriended several of them, and found out they used and sold drugs. She had always heard about heroin and how swell some people thought it was. She was curious and finally tried heroin. The first times were free, provided by her new friends. She came to like it, and began using daily in December 1994. She is willing to remain clean, and she would eventually like to write about her ordeal to help others. She had gained the knowledge necessary to sway anyone from the dead end of drugs."

It took months for the criminal case to wind through the system. On January 31, 1996, Michelle's mother penned a letter to the judge who would sentence her daughter:

*Dear Judge Rogers:*

*Michelle Tardif Kirkwood is a very gifted, intelligent and sensitive person. She speaks three languages fluently, has lived in France and Spain and is a seasoned traveler. At the age of 18, she went to Paris and managed, all by herself, to find a job as film critic at Le Nouvel Observateur, a prestigious Paris magazine, which is no mean feat for a person of her age and background. Her inquisitive mind has led her to explore certain forbidden fields which cannot, by any means, be approved of, but one thing is sure, given her zest for life, the wide range of her interests, she does not qualify as a habitual substance user. Her curiosity as a writer with a university training in literature may have led her to a "trip" she is not about to relive soon. Being a well-adjusted person with a good and stable relationship with her husband, this regrettable incident in her life should serve as a reminder that nobody is immune to errors of judgment and this should serve as a strong deterrent in the future.*

*Simone T. Tardif*

On February 21, 1996, Michelle pleaded guilty to a lesser charge of possessing drug paraphernalia, and was sentenced to probation. The Immigration and Naturalization Service was notified that she was a "criminal alien." Court records indicate that less than a month later, on March 18, Michelle tested positive for opiates on her first court-ordered urinalysis. Her participation in required drug

counseling was characterized as "sporadic at best." On April 30, Michelle was busted again after police saw her leaving a crack house on East Garfield Street in Phoenix.

According to a police report, she failed to come to a complete stop at a stop sign, and when she was pulled over, consented to a search. The officer found six used syringes in the car, and noticed Michelle had fresh blood spots on her right forearm, on top of a vein. Michelle told him she injected heroin earlier in the day. She was arrested, and a later, more thorough search turned up a rock of cocaine hidden in her right shoe. Michelle was released from jail the next morning.

On May 14, facing a new set of felony drug charges, Michelle entered the Chandler Valley Hope Residential Treatment Program. She was expelled two days later for using drugs in the program, and for possession of heroin and a syringe. Valley Hope transported her to Tempe St. Luke's Hospital for detoxification and treatment. Michelle was caught shooting up twice in the first 24 hours; she was kicked out of St. Luke's on May 17. Three days later, Michelle's probation was formally revoked, and a warrant was issued for her arrest. It took almost two weeks to get her into custody. She was arrested the morning of June 4 at her home in Tempe. This time, Michelle remained in jail.

A probation officer interviewed her there, and wrote in a pre-sentence report dated July 8, 1996: "Despite her arrest for a new crime while on probation, this officer sees the defendant as an individual who has the capability of regaining sobriety, and again becoming a contributing and law abiding citizen." The officer recommended a six-month jail term, with early release into a residential treatment program. One week later, Michelle wrote a letter from jail to the judge who would decide whether to let her out for treatment, or lock her up for a couple of years. They are the words of a lucid, seemingly penitent, Mrs. Meat Puppet:

*From: Michelle Tardif A073849  
Estrella Jail C-302  
To: Honorable Judge Alfred Rogers  
201 W. Jefferson, Superior Court  
Phoenix, Arizona*

*Your Honor:*

*This is probably the most difficult task I have had to accomplish: instill trust and confidence in my good character, now that I am an inmate and a convicted drug offender. Having been an addict for the last 11 1/2 years, I lost my ability to convince anyone of the soundness of my judgment. I knew it at the time (before my incarceration) although I was quite powerless to change without a complete and utter turnaround, affecting every aspect of my life. I must have undergone some measure of*

*transformation in the meantime, because I am now able to think and speak with a clearer conscience and a much greater sense of honesty, for the first time in so long.*

*I would like to express my profound dismay and disappointment with myself and how I (mis) managed this whole drug-induced nightmare that has landed me in jail. First, I'd like to admit that from the time of my arrest in September 'til the moment I was put in custody, I had not succeeded in remaining drug-free. The several attempts I made to "kick" the habit on my own were fully of 2-day agony and horror. I tried Methadone, detox at St. Luke's, TASC — only to reuse, a veritable non-stop festival of stubborn, fear-based (and fear-of-pain based) avoidance of reality.*

*For the last several months before my arrest, my domestic/home life had been turned upside-down with the onset of my mother-in-law's late-diagnosed cancer. My husband became absent more and more frequently, until he finally moved into her house full-time. We started seeing each other only 1-2 hours a day, and my drug use escalated (or returned to normal, since I was constantly struggling to quit). I started using needles, whereas I previously smoked heroin. All this I kept from him, knowing how devastated her illness had made him; I put on a brave face, a mask of supportiveness, and almost felt proud of myself for "being so strong."*

*It attests somewhat to my canniness and ability to charm — skills that can be put to better use — that I had been able to deceive so many people for so long; my P.O. [probation officer], the courts, medical personnel, friends and loved ones, my poor husband, and ultimately, and most importantly, myself. It is no accomplishment, it is only pathetic. It's no wonder a person under the influence of such a nefarious drug would get caught a second time — for \$5 worth, no less — in the hands of the law. And in doing so, spend a lifetime regretting having thrown one's life away.*

*Your honor, I have been drug free for 11 1/2 months for the first time in over a year. Upon entering jail, my weight was under 100 lbs! (I'm 5'9"! ). I have gained 25 lbs. to go along with the resolutions I hope will last me a lifetime. One of these is that the "system" does not only aim to punish — in my case incarceration has so far been the only way to remove me from the drugs I was so incapable of resisting. By the sheer Spartan conditions of deprivation (must I really thank Sheriff Joe? Yes!) I have been made keenly aware of what I used to have: I miss my husband, of course; my dog and cat; my friends, job, plants, my comfy bed and my pillow... my kitchen, grocery shopping, picking a ripe cantaloupe, you name it!*

*Do I miss drugs? All I can remember now is fear (of the law, of the dealers and other unsavory characters, of running out of drugs) and all the other sordid details, basking in shame. While my husband was away caring for his ailing mother, I'd be spending hours in squalid surroundings, trying to blend in (!) — neglecting my appearance, having purposefully alienated my friends (none of whom used drugs nor, I deludedly believed, knew that I was). I had the company of street hustlers and*

*other creatures of ill-repute, and I thought nothing of it. I had become one of them, for all intents and purposes. But I knew in my heart I was different. I still cling to this.*

*I would like to convey to you, Judge Rogers, how determined I am to keep my newly-restored healthy habits and positive attitude. It hasn't been easy. The specter of prison — more time — looms constantly. There comes a time where despair is right around the corner. After the hoping and the contemplating, time became counter-productive and may lead to despondency, self-loathing or worse. This build-up would seemingly create a dangerous, vulnerable state for someone w/a history of using mind-soothing drugs. But I keep praying that, just as the physical scars are slowly and surely fading, the emotional ones won't become permanent.*

*Your honor, the good people at Chandler Valley Hope — aptly named — have been in contact and have promised my husband they would, with your blessing of course, allow me to re-enter and receive treatment. My husband is home now, and is willing to attend any/all treatment open to the family. We are anxious to start a family (we've been together almost 9 years, a sure sign of constancy, at the very least). Since I have finally overcome the physical part of the addiction, I have no reason, no excuse to violate terms of probation ([urinalysis tests] were the only, albeit formidable, obstacle). I dare envision returning to a life not plunged into the abyss (as with a long prison term), ruining everything I've ever wanted: family, job, happiness, freedom, self-respect.*

*I want my old life back and a chance to prove to myself, to you and to the system as well, that I have not simply become a hopeless, unqualified lost cause! I have used my speaking and writing skills (I am fluent in Spanish and in my native French) to help others writing letters, counseling, etc. But I humbly believe my good qualities could and should be used in a more productive manner than within these walls. In conclusion, allow me to theorize that repeat offenders, in the case of heroin users, should be pitied and judged apart from those criminals calculatingly re-committing an offense. Addicts act out of survival. As a sober, productive member of society, I will not be guilty of recidivism. Thank you for your consideration.*

*Sincerely, Michelle Tardif*

The next day, Judge Rogers reinstated Michelle's probation. She was released, after serving 41 days in jail, and entered the residential treatment program at Chandler Valley Hope — again. This time, she lasted almost two months. Her September 15 urinalysis tested positive for codeine, and she was expelled from Chandler Valley Hope — again — for using heroin. She was transported to Tempe St. Luke's a second time, and a second time she was kicked out, on October 15, for shooting up in the hospital. A week later, police busted her buying heroin and cocaine in downtown Phoenix.

"Talk about a failure of the system," says Curt. "It's a mystery to me what the fuck they were doing, because she was rubbing their faces in it."

Another warrant was issued for Michelle's arrest for multiple probation violations, but it was never executed, and her case just seemed to blip off the radar, with one exception: In late 1997, the INS began efforts to deport her to Canada. Curt says the last time he saw Michelle and Cris together was at his mother's funeral in December 1996.

"My bro was already going down, but obviously our mom dying didn't help," says Curt.

By the beginning of this year, Michelle and Cris took few visitors who weren't drug dealers. Friends who managed to get Cris to answer a knock — one gave up pounding and stuck his head through the doggie door and yelled until Cris opened up — say Michelle never came out of the back bedroom.



Curt Kirkwood artwork

This April, Cris was stopped for a traffic violation and arrested for driving without corrective lenses. A subsequent search of his car found cocaine on the driver's floorboard. Cris also had a glass pipe in his jacket pocket. Cris told police he was Curt. He gave his name as Curtis Matthew Kirkwood, and provided Curt's birth date and social security number. He'd pulled the same stunt on five recent traffic tickets. His case is still pending. On July 31, a third warrant was issued for Michelle's arrest. It was noted she had failed to meet with her probation officer or take a urinalysis for almost a full year. That warrant was also never executed.

*"Where do bad folks go when they die?  
They don't go to heaven where the angels fly  
They go to the lake of fire and fry  
Don't see 'em again, 'til the Fourth of July."  
— "Lake of Fire," Meat Puppets II*

Early in the afternoon of August 12, 1998, Curt Kirkwood's phone rang in Austin. It was his manager, Tammy Blevins, of Austin-based Blevins Entertainment. She told him Cris had just called, hysterical, saying he thought Michelle was dead. Blevins had told Cris to check for a pulse. Cris put down the phone, and Blevins could hear him yelling Michelle's name. He came back on, crying, and said his wife was clearly dead.

"I can't handle this," he told her. "I can't take this."

Blevins told Cris to hang up and call the police, but he refused. He told her he couldn't live without Michelle. Afraid he was about to kill himself, Blevins broke the connection and dialed the Tempe Police Department, then called Curt. A police dispatcher immediately called Michelle and Cris' house. Cris answered.

"Yeah," he said.

"Hi, is this Cris?"

"Yeah."

"This is Tricia with Tempe police. Is something going on there?"

"Oh, hang on just a second. I'll be right back with you."

Cris never came back on the line. The dispatcher sent two patrol officers to the scene. They arrived, and when no one responded to repeated knocks, they entered the home through the back door, which was open. The big-screen television in the living room was on, but the volume was muted. Not five minutes had passed since the dispatcher had talked to Cris, but he was gone. A burst from the officers' police radios alerted them that Cris had two warrants out for his arrest. Otherwise, the house was quiet. The officers began a room-by-room search.

"The entire house was quite dirty/cluttered and there were large piles of clothing, miscellaneous personal belongings, and housewares stacked in each room," one of the officers wrote in his report. "When we came to the first of two bathrooms, the light was on and I noticed what appeared to be dark colored excrement smeared on the side of both the bathtub and toilet, and on the bathroom floor.

"Throughout the house, I noticed what appeared to be circular blood spatter patterns on the walls and ceiling. The circular patterns resembled what appeared to be the contents of a syringe being squirted against the walls and ceiling."

The house was littered with used syringes — 113 total — and other drug debris: bent, burnt spoons, glass pipes, and "cupcake-type saran wrappers," lightly dusted with cocaine residue. Michelle's body was in the master bedroom. She was lying across the foot of the bed, clothed only in a white T-shirt. A blue elastic hairband was tightly wrapped around her left arm, just below the elbow. Inches from her left hand were a small baggie with cocaine residue, a syringe, a lighter, and a piece of cotton in a burnt spoon.

"The body was very thin and emaciated, almost having a skeletal appearance," one officer noted. "The pelvic bones protruded grossly from the hip area."

The fingers on both of Michelle's hands were thin and shriveled. The officers recorded needle marks and sores on her neck, both arms, and both legs. Her eyes were open and glassy. She had been dead for several hours. The officers called a detective, who called the coroner's office. The county medical examiner ruled Michelle's death an accident, due to complications of chronic intravenous drug abuse combined with an overdose of morphine and cocaine. The autopsy found that Michelle was suffering from an infected pulmonary valve, acute bronchopneumonia, and severe malnutrition at the time of her death. She weighed 88 pounds.

Two nights before Michelle died, Simone Tardif says, her daughter called her from Tempe. She sounded sick. She begged her mother to wire her \$200 immediately.

"I said, 'My God, why? Cris has more money than I will ever make.' She just said, 'Please, please.'"

Cris came on the line and reiterated the plea.

"He told me he couldn't get any more money from his accountant for a few days, and it was just a passing thing, but they really needed the money right then, not in a few days. He promised he would pay me back quickly. So I sent it."

In so doing, Simone Tardif now realizes, she likely bought her daughter's final, fatal high.

"The sad thing is, Michelle told me she was supposed to go to the Betty Ford Clinic the next week. So you see, I wish I would not have sent the money. She just sounded so weak."

Cris kept his promise. He wired Simone Tardif \$200 a week after Michelle died.

Shortly after Michelle overdosed, Curt flew into Sky Harbor Airport. He came only because he had to. In order to clear his name on the false drug charges Cris had tried to pin on him, Curt had to make a court appearance and be fingerprinted. He came only to clean up another mess Cris had made, not to console or help his brother. He'd already tried. Daily intravenous use of cocaine or heroin, let alone both, sucks the soul out of people. They walk and talk, but like vampires, they're just dark illusions of themselves. Curt learned this firsthand before his brother's tailspin.

Years ago, a woman Curt loved became a heroin addict.

"We were together five years before she started doing drugs, and it took me another two to figure it out," says Curt. "By the time I left her, she was already gone. Her personality just vaporized."

When Curt saw his brother in August, he says Cris was still Cris, part of the time. "He'd alternate between being a fiend and crying a lot, acting like my bro."

It was enough to make Curt try to help, one more time. He paid a professional interventionist to come from California and help him get his brother into a private, high-dollar residential detox and rehab center in Los Angeles. Curt, the interventionist, and a group of the Kirkwoods' old friends spent four days with Cris in a hotel near the Biltmore, trying to talk him into getting on a plane. The tense situation nearly exploded when a hotel security team went into Cris' room.

"Cris wasn't making any noise or scaring anybody, he just wouldn't let the maid in the room, four days straight," explains Curt. "So these security guys show up, and all of a sudden, this situation where we're just trying to get my brother on a plane becomes this big fucking thing, because there's a lot of shit in his room, and the security guys are threatening to call the cops, which would have been a catastrophe."

The interventionist was able to mollify security. "He's an older man, about 60, and a real respectable pro. He dealt with them. He said, 'Look, we're just trying to get a very sick man to a hospital,' and even when he put it in that light, they were just like, 'Good.' They treated us like shit, just because my brother was in a bad way with drugs.

"This stigma our society puts on junkies is fucked. My brother is not a bad person. It's a sickness. I wish someone would force medical treatment on him. But the law says you can't force medical treatment on people. Instead, you put them in jail. Well, fuck, that doesn't make any sense. To someone in my position, that's infuriating.

"Anybody who's ever partied understands drug addiction. Even if drugs didn't set the hook, you can feel it just a little bit. You can understand the junkie mindset. You want to have fun and feel no pain, and that's all it takes. But then it all turns around on you, and it's no fun, and it's nothing but pain, but by then it's too late, because you're sick. But you're not a criminal."

Cris eventually got on the plane and checked into rehab, but he checked out five days later and went to a friend's house in L.A. When Cris called a limo, his friend tried to stop him from getting in, but Cris shoved him out of the way. That was in late August. Cris showed up in Tempe in early September. Curt heard from mutual friends that Cris was living in his car for a while, then a Motel 6. Curt says no one has seen him since a few days before Halloween.

On October 6, Cris was arrested outside the Royal Inn Motel in north Scottsdale for possession of stolen property and false vehicle registration. A police officer became suspicious when he saw the license plate on Cris' Infiniti was haphazardly attached, ran the number, and discovered the plate was stolen. Those charges are also pending. Cris turned 38 on October 22. Curt didn't send him a present or call.



"I have no idea how to get in touch with him," he says.

Months before that last failed intervention, Curt stopped waiting for Cris to come back, and moved on without him. In the fall of last year, he formed a new band with guitarist Kyle Ellison and drummer Shandon Sahn. Curt says Ellison is one of the few people who can relate to his bitter conundrum. Ellison's brother, Sims, played bass for Pariah, going into a deep depression after Pariah was dropped by Geffen Records and killing himself.

"I think it's a day-to-day struggle for both Kyle and I to deal with our reality right now, and keep from irrationally thinking we're pathetic worms because it's all our fault. We help each other out in that respect."

Curt's new band debuted in March in Austin during South by Southwest, the music industry's largest annual conference. They played under the name Royal Neanderthal Orchestra, and received ecstatic reviews. One prominent Austin critic dubbed R.N.O. the most promising new band to emerge from the city in years.

"Everyone just assumed we'd be signed to some fat deal in a matter of weeks," Curt says.

Thing is, though, Curt already has a deal. He's under contract with London Records, the company that put out *Too High to Die* and *No Joke*. Unless he's willing to give up the rights to the name Meat Puppets, which he's not, Curt is obligated to provide London with two more Meat Puppets albums. Which he's now happy to do, with or without Cris. Curt is focusing now on preproduction work in his recording studio, and plans to record a new Meat Puppets album early next year. He says he has about four albums' worth of new material. He wants to be doubly clear on this point: The Meat Puppets are alive and well.

"It seems like every time I've picked up a music magazine in the last two or three years, I've read about how the Meat Puppets disbanded in '95, or I see myself described as 'ex-Meat Puppet Curt Kirkwood.' And I'm like, 'Hey, I didn't say a fucking thing about the band breaking up, did I? No.' It's my band. Just because I've got a junkie brother, that means no more Meat Puppets? Whatever.

"I mean, if this new band puts out something under a name other than Meat Puppets, what's the first thing every fan and critic is going to do? Compare it to the Meat Puppets. So what's the point?"

"I had enough money to take as long a break as I wanted, so I did. I have enough money to retire now, but I don't want that. Every other kid in the mall has at least heard my band's name, so I'd say I still have places to go."

So far, original Meat Puppets drummer Derrick Bostrom has not been involved with Curt's new project. He is, however, still an integral part of the Meat Puppets. Bostrom tends the band's Web

page, answers 40-60 pieces of fan mail a week, and is organizing the coming reissue of eight Meat Puppets albums on the Rykodisc label. Bostrom says the enhanced CDs will contain live concert footage and bonus tracks. He is also overseeing the compilation of a live album of Meat Puppets concerts from 1988, due out next spring, also on Rykodisc.

"My future role in the Meat Puppets is somewhat up in the air," Bostrom says. "But obviously, the Meat Puppets as an entity will continue, new album or not."

Bostrom, who says he never did hard drugs and quit smoking pot long ago, hasn't seen Cris since the Kirkwoods' mother's funeral, almost two years ago.

"I can't help other people slay their dragons," says Bostrom. "The situation as it stands is very sad, but I've known Cris a long time, and I've never thought of him as fundamentally weak. I think he may get out of this mess alive."

Curt also admits he holds out hope.

"No matter how logical or cynical or realistic I try to be to protect myself, of course I still have hope. He's my brother. There would have to be a tremendous amount of mending, but there's always a place for him."

Curt is waiting for the sunset on the huge wooden deck of his new, beautiful home in the hills that skirt Austin. There's a hot tub on the deck, a swimming pool, and Curt's bulldog, Lulu. His silver Lexus is parked in the garage. He doesn't look happy.

"I'm unrequited," he says. "It's just hard to fuckin' deal with what's happened in my life in the last three years, with my mom and my brother. I mean, here I am, with my shit so fucking hard-wired and together. I got lots of potential left, and a lot of bread. But it's a cold comfort having real money for the first time in your life when your family is dying off around you."

In the morning, Curt says, the buzzards rise from the valley below and fly in a vortex, high overhead. The sun paints a veil of clouds on the horizon orange and pink. The air is cool and sweet.

"Fuck," Curt says. "I really wish I could get my brother up here to see this."