

THE QUARRY

Angus Dalton

Giving Up Glamour: The Magic and Mayhem of Ice Addiction

Nevermore

Will and I walk along the gutter after a summer party gone dull, our bare feet dodging redback webs and shards of glass catching streetlight. An almost empty bottle of vodka swings between us. My hair reeks of chlorine. Will had shoved me into the pool after I swatted a lit fag from his mouth; he'd never have wanted one sober.

He broke the silence. 'Do you remember that book I leant you?'

'Book?'

'*Tithe* or some shit.'

I did remember – a black hardback inlaid with a metallic-green butterfly. He'd lent me his copy years ago when we became friends in early high school. I'd never given it back. My slowly sobering brain reached for past imaginings sparked by *Tithe's* pages – like remembering a dream with the texture of paper. I get flashes of a girl scorching the underside of a teaspoon with a match, melting a substance the

colour of earwax. She draws it up into a syringe and pushes the steel into the inside of her elbow. As a line of beaded blood trails down to her wrist the dark around her manifests into shapes: ogres with hulking muscles, fae wielding swords, changelings with manic faces.

The book is a suburban fantasy novel by Holly Black about a girl named Val who discovers an underworld of fae living in the train tunnels and abandoned spaces of her New Jersey neighbourhood. Humans can access to this faery world – and are afforded the use of magic – under the influence of a drug called Nevermore. Once injected, the human characters become aware of sweet voices drifting out of drains and snarling beasts that skulk in train tunnels. Plumes of coloured light spew from fingertips and ignite alleyways. This magic is called Glamour.

I'm about to tell Will that I do remember the book, it's at home gathering dust, but he says:

'I think one day I'll be an addict.'

'What?'

'Yeah. Get on the hard shit. I feel like I have that personality. That it's inevitable.'

We walk past patches of pale grass guarded by mailboxes printed with NO JUNK MAIL. I run up to one and cover the last word with a finger.

'Hey,' I gesture to the sign, grinning. 'No junk. Okay?'

He doesn't smile.

When we're almost at his house he lobs the vodka bottle against a garage wall. He turns around, hugs my stunned frame, and leaps through the open window of his bedroom. He draws the blind behind him. The road is scattered with wet crystals.

That was four years ago. We lost contact soon after.

I wish I had taken that post-midnight conversation more seriously. I thought it was post-HSC anxiety, a brief flash of existentialism in the haze between school and uni. But it proved to be more. The last I heard, Will had moved to Bathurst, and was dealing ice.

In his memoir, *The Ice Age*, Luke Williams describes a similar conversation he had with his best friend during high school who was comparably disenfranchised with school and the society she was growing up in. At 3am by the fireplace, she said: 'I don't really have an identity – I'm not really *anyone* ... I am thinking about becoming like a junkie – it makes you somebody.'ⁱ (66)

Almost a decade later, she was regularly taking ice, and Luke moved in with her and some other addicts in Pakenham, an outer suburb of Melbourne, for a journalistic investigation into methamphetamine addiction. But he became addicted himself. The process of becoming hooked on crystal meth and the resulting psychosis and aggression he experienced are all detailed in his memoir. He sees addiction not as a result of one bad decision, but rather a result of a troubled past, and a symptom of his dissatisfaction with suburban living. He writes:

‘It is an anti-anxiety drug in the age of anxiety: a depression-busting, awe-inspiring chemical that brings a tribe, adventure, and excitement to an often monotonous, uneventful suburban life.’ (25)

Reading *Tithe* was one of the ways I escaped the brain-rot of suburban school holidays. The premise of a gritty faery underworld lurking in the shadows of construction sites and sleepy newsagents was impossible to resist. But I think what appealed to Will about the story is the fact that there is no ‘Chosen One’; no hero elected by fate or by some inheritance of magic from an ancient bloodline – anyone could be fantastical. All they had to do was make a small tear in their veins and let the magic in. Luke writes:

‘I hate rules and limitations, such as the fact that humans don’t live forever, don’t have wings and can’t fly, and I can’t deny that a syringe full of meth brings me pretty close to flying and feeling immortal.’ (33)

Fascinated with his story, I found Luke’s contact email and sent him a tentative string of questions about how and why he got addicted. He wrote back within the hour.

‘I don’t think there is anything wrong with wanting to change your consciousness,’ he wrote. ‘But my advice would be: don’t do it with crystal meth. It is too addictive – you often very quickly confuse reality with fantasy.’

Soon We’ll All Be Brilliant

‘I think there’s too much clandestine glamour attaching to drugs just now,’ said Ted Noffs in a grainy *Four Corners* episode from the mid-1960s as he opened Wayside Chapel, one of the first community centres to respond with empathy to drug addiction. ‘I believe that by bringing the issue of drugs out into the open a lot of the glamour will disappear.’ⁱⁱ

Noffs' efforts were valiant in a time where the Church looked disdainfully at his attempts to provide counselling services to the addicts of Kings Cross. But 50 years later, the perceived glamour of drug taking remains. Luke tells me, 'There are many different reasons why people take drugs – glamour is one of them. I am surprised how interesting people find me because I was a druggo – my goodness, if I had of known all I needed to go was use needles and have psychotic episodes to get people to read my work I would have made it all public a decade ago.'

One of the first incarnations of amphetamine was accidentally boiled up in 1887 by a Romanian chemist who was trying to synthesise fabric dyes. When the chemical arrived in Australia three decades later, it was sold freely on pharmacy shelves. From the 1930s-50s, amphetamine was the most popular anti-depressant in the world.

Australian newspapers touted the chemical, then marketed as Benzedrine, as 'The Drug that Will Banish Shyness'ⁱⁱⁱ. An article appeared in a 1937 issue of *The Mail* in Adelaide with the headline, 'Soon We'll All Brilliant'^{iv}, reporting that the drug increased confidence, initiative, and articulation. After waxing lyrical about the reported benefits of Benzedrine, it finishes abruptly with: '*The danger of addiction is stressed.*'

After reports of people taking over 200 tablets per day and an epidemic of pharmacy robberies throughout Australia in the late 1940s, distribution of Benzedrine was restricted to prescription, and then finally made illegal worldwide by the UN's Psychotropic Substances Act in 1976. In city clubs, partygoers started taking Benzedrine, now rebranded as 'speed' on the black market. Increasingly pure versions of amphetamine began circulating worldwide, until, in 2011, its purest known form arrived on Australian shores in the form of the crystallised methamphetamine - 'ice.'

When Luke moved in with his mates, he thought he'd be reporting on the powdered meth he'd partied on in previous years – he'd even planned to take some. But he didn't realise a far more potent version had infiltrated the suburbs.

'Crystallised meth is totally different – you are awake for days at a time and often go psychotic – I was pretty much hooked from the get-go. I didn't realise I was taking crystal meth until after I moved out of the house and started talking to researchers,' he says.

Taking ice inflates your ego to its highest point, into a state that Luke describes as 'fantasia'.

‘Crystal meth is a very ugly, atomising, ego-maniacal drug that gives a false sense of achievement leading to a sense of personal superiority and sometimes psychotic delusions of grandeur,’ explains Luke.

The hyper-charged ego boost that characterises a meth high is the result of a dopamine spike a thousand times stronger than a naturally induced rush. Despite that we’re a society increasingly disassociated from the natural world, we’re still at the mercy of a force that has driven every organism since the first cell split 3.5 billion years ago: the manic urge to survive and reproduce.

But we’re evolution gone haywire. Where our ancestors fought fang and claw for calorie-high foodstuffs, we line up in a drive-thru, bark orders into a speaker, and a minute later, a huge dosage of salt and sugar drops into our laps. Macca’s is a juggernaut simply because it has tapped into our basic biological desire for high-calorie foods. The rest of the animal kingdom battle, perform and kill for sex, but a potential partner for us is as close as the swipe of a finger. The reason we spend hours curating Instagram feeds and Facebook profiles has a similarly biological basis. As social creatures, the more people we surround ourselves with, the greater access we have to resources and safety and the more protection we have for our offspring - #safetyinnumbers. Social media tricks us into thinking that we’re part of a huge group, which is why a phone vibration can trigger a jolt of excitement - it makes us feel as if we’re increasing our chances of ‘survival’.

The dopamine-fuelled motivation to chase evolutionary success still churns away in our brains and through our bloodstreams, even if it’s been rendered superfluous by our hyper-successful civilisation. An upsurge of dopamine is the most raw, animalistic and biologically vital feeling we have access to. It is this feeling that is unleashed by an injection or lungful of crystal methamphetamine.

Is the ‘war on drugs’, then, a vain fight against the primordial impulses of evolution?

Scare Tactics

Luke’s answer to the question of how we should tackle widespread meth addiction is curt: decriminalisation.

It’s a conclusion that’s hard to stomach after you read about the violence that ice users are capable of, and the manic throes of psychosis Luke found himself at the

mercy of during his time as an addict. One of the hardest parts of writing *The Ice Age* was picking through the flaky tatters of memory left over from his bizarre psychotic episodes.

‘There was a weird subtext of men – including myself – becoming sexually obsessed with adolescences when we were on the drug and this collided with the fact I began having psychotic episodes believing the local Coffee Club was operating a paedophile ring in town (possibly an expression of my own guilt). So much of that was left out, because it was all just too confusing.’

Around a quarter of ice users come to suffer from methamphetamine-induced psychosis, which can involve intense paranoia and hallucinations. As Luke succumbed to psychosis, he became convinced that his parents had paid his friends to murder him by slipping small doses of cyanide into his food.

When the dopamine begins to ebb away after a meth high, an abnormal amount of adrenaline lingers in the blood. This, paired with psychosis, can result in astonishing violence.

One case involved the murder of an 18-year-old girl in Ultimo, Sydney^v. The coroner who examined her smashed ribs and the torn tissue of her heart made the initial conclusion that she had been involved in a high-speed car crash. But the injuries were actually administered by her boyfriend’s bare hands. He was high on crystal meth at the time of the attack.

However, the evocation of the ice-user as a violent ‘monster’ has become a stereotype, to the detriment of the addicts, the victims of violence, and the fight to reclaim regional towns from crystal meth as a whole. The anti-ice ad^{vi} currently circulating in movie cinemas and on YouTube features a haggard man elbowing his mother in the face after he robs her, a girl crying on her bed and digging bloody craters out of her skin with her fingernails, and a man head-butting a doctor and hurling a chair at a screaming receptionist before being tackled by two policemen. Similarly, the first hit you get on Google if you search ‘crystal meth’ is the website drugfreeworld.org^{vii}. A colour-leached video plays, showing a pale, snarling young man raise a gun at a convenience store worker.

These advertisements are obviously using scare tactics to discourage potential users, but for regular users and people already dependent on crystal methamphetamine – of which there are over 286,000 in Australia^{viii} – who are portrayed in this way, the

result is alienating and reductive. How can you speak out and search for help if you're portrayed as a monster?

The installation of a supervised ice-smoking room in Liverpool has been met with outrage and petitions from local residents worried about a spike in violence^{ix}. What could be a progressive step forward in increasing user safety is being blockaded because of the alarm these media campaigns proliferate.

Luke says that this ice-smoking room and its staff would've actually seen a reduction in ice-fuelled violence, as the people who staff institutions of the sort are trained specifically to deal with drug users.

'There is so much violence in hospitals by ice users because public hospital staff offer no empathy, no patience and very little understanding of what it means to be in a drug-induced psychosis,' he says. 'I have on occasions been into hospitals and actually had nurses antagonise me while I was on drugs – it's bloody disgusting.'

Prior to reading Luke's book and our back-and-forth email conversation – during which he was courteous, thorough and courageous with his answers – whenever I thought of Will, I cast him in one of those bleached anti-ice ads. In my mind his eyes were underscored with grit and purple circles, dead skin lodged under fingernails, split knuckles, teeth the colour of *Tithe's* ageing pages. In my dreams, he wandered alone in streetlight flinging bottles at walls, watching the glass scatter. What if he was caught dealing – was he now pressed against the cold concrete of a cell writhing against the venom of withdrawals?

Now my imaginings are far less dramatic. Will is not a monster. Nor is Luke. We know that humanity reacts with violence and fear towards things we don't understand – perhaps another undesirable leftover from our evolutionary instincts – but the greatest leaps forward in terms of human rights are propelled by empathy.

I can't remember if the characters in *Tithe* ever manage to untie themselves from the addictive tendrils of Nevermore, or if they ever overcome their lust for Glamour. I pick up Will's copy from my bookshelf. Mould scatters the cover like track marks. Its pages bloom with fading yellow bruises and the butterfly is decaying in lustrous flakes. I go to read the last page. Then, I stop. I turn to page one and curl up beside a window that looks out over the streetlights hovering in a grid above my suburb.

To understand the end again, I must start from the beginning.

Works Cited:

ⁱ Williams, Luke. *The Ice Age: A journey into crystal meth addiction*. Melbourne: Scribe Publishing, 2016. Print.

ⁱⁱ Four Corners. Facebook. 7. Sept.

<https://www.facebook.com/abc4corners/videos/vl.335220750154562/10153920129330954/?type=1>.

Accessed 08/09/16.

ⁱⁱⁱ Author Unknown. 'New Drug Will Banish Shyness'. *Border Watch (Mount Gambier, SA : 1861 - 1954)* 4 August 1936, pp.6. Web. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article77934134>. Accessed 10/10/16.

^{iv} Author Unknown. 'Soon We'll All Be Brilliant'. *The Mail (Adelaide, SA : 1912 - 1954)* 15 May 1937, pp.2. Web. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article55930408>. Accessed 10/10/16.

^v Meddows, David. 'Sean King bashed teen girlfriend so violently she looked like a car crash victim'. *The Daily Telegraph*. 9 December 2015: Web. <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/special-features/in-depth/ice-addict-killers-sean-king-blames-the-toxic-drug-for-brutal-bashing-murder-of-jazminjean-ajbschitz/news-story/eb97687dcb45a6e7e958ab4264558c2c>. Accessed 09/09/16.

^{vi} 'Ice destroys lives Australia Government Commercial 2015 HD' Youtube, uploaded by Commercials HD: Abantec, 15 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfB3iK9jQ_I. Accessed 15/08/16.

^{vii} 'Crystal Meth' Foundation for a Drug-Free World, 2006-2016, <http://www.drugfreeworld.org/drugfacts/crystallmeth.html> Accessed 15/08/16.

^{viii} Degenhardt L; Larney S; Chan G; Dobbins T; Weier M; Roxburgh A; Hall WD; McKetin R, 2016, 'Estimating the number of regular and dependent methamphetamine users in Australia, 2002-2014', *The Medical journal of Australia*, vol. 204, pp. 153. Print.

^{ix} Metherell, Lexi. 'Liverpool community members express unease with plans for Australia's first ice inhalation room'. *ABC News*. 24 August 2016. Web. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-24/liverpool-community-uneasy-with-plans-for-ice-inhalation-room/7780070> Accessed 10/09/16.

Black, Holly. *Tithe: A Modern Faerie Tale*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002. Print.