



Badly broken glass

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Our department boasts the time-honoured tradition of hosting a symposium once in every two years. The topics covered range from clinical chemistry, to toxicology and immunology. On the day, as we splintered off into focus groups, I joined the toxicology session where my friend, Jane, was giving a talk. Her presentation focused on immunoassay screening versus gas chromatography-mass spectrometry as a confirmatory test for methamphetamine. It was raining heavily that day and her presentation was punctuated by episodes of hail violently hitting the glass windows of the lecture theatre.

Later that evening, the rain kept pouring down relentlessly and the whole town was lit by episodic dazzling lightning. The wind was so strong that one of the glass panes of a window in one of my bathrooms shattered quite badly. I cleaned up the mess and began to think about dinner. The streets were almost empty and I had little interest in venturing outside to brave the storm. Instead, I stirred up a ready-made

bachelor's soup and flipped though the channels on TV.

The words crystal meth caught my attention. It was with respect to a tele-series, where, as per the synopsis, an apparently ordinary family man, a chemistry teacher by day, is inspired to indulge in illicit methamphetamine production by night. This story seemed to fit the backdrop of the blood test requests we get in our lab. As the cold wind permeated the house through the cracks of the broken glass in my bathroom, my interest was piqued. I decided to watch the series - poetic justice for the moment given that methamphetamine's street names include 'glass' and 'shards'.

The main protagonist, Walter White, is the victim of a stroke of bad luck. Despite being a non-smoker he is diagnosed with an inoperable lung cancer. When told the diagnosis, he acts more concerned about the stain on the doctor's jacket than the actual news itself. Later, however, perceiving his own existence as bleak and one that he

has no control over, he joins his brother-in-law - a drug enforcement agent - to watch a drug raid first hand. The experience inspires him to team up to cook crystal meth with an ex-student of his, Jesse Pinkman. The story goes on to explore the many facets of illicit drug trafficking - from criminality, violence, prison and prostitution to everything else that goes hand-in-hand with the drug industry.

Jesse states at one point down the line, “we make poison for people who don’t care”. As they tread the road to damnation, the series gives an intimate glimpse into the universe of methamphetamine. Other drugs also make an appearance, with characters smoking weed and using heroin. Jesse’s girlfriend dies of an overdose. Built into the story-line we see drug-sniffing dogs, difficulties of former users in finding a non-degrading, stable job, and probation and drug rehabilitation sessions.

Time ticked away as I watched the consequences of methamphetamine use - from insomnia, boosted energy levels, delusions, violence and borderline psychosis, to killings as prophylactic measures. Chemistry and toxicology often took the stage – there was the mention of thalidomide isomers during a chemistry class on chirality, of castor beans being processed into ricin, of

poisoned party drinks served to the drug cartel, of crimes to obtain the methylamine precursor, and lily of the valley plant poisoning. Walter, the former master of crystallography, gains the dual persona of Heisenberg and slowly abandons civilized society. Although it is said ‘sometimes forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest’, Walter’s new drug business leaves his family fatally fractured and emotionally damaged.

Two weeks later, when I finally finished watching all the seasons on Netflix, I happened to meet my friend, Jane, in the staff room. I told her how, after her methamphetamine talk at the symposium, I, funnily enough, ended up binge-watching the ‘Breaking Bad’ TV series. Jane turned around after stirring her coffee and said, ‘Yeah I watched that as well.’

From crystalline white powder to the signature blue meth in the series, the recreational drug, stimulating dopamine release, gives its users temporary pleasure, reward, and euphoria. Addiction, dependence and far greater horrors are portrayed, culminating in the Felina finale, Blood, Methamphetamine and Tears. Even as Walter perishes, test requests continue to trickle into our labs in a silent, lesser known procession of a fleeting, potentially fatal fantasy.

Author's disclaimer: This short story is a work of fiction inspired by the popular TV series ‘Breaking Bad’ by Vince Gilligan. People’s names, outside the actual description of the TV series plot itself and its characters, are fictitious and any resemblance is purely coincidental.