



The
Farallon
Review

LITERARY JOURNAL

3



Art to Medicine

Paul Mann

Traffic is already thick on Interstate 95 as sunlight begins to saturate the eastern sky. Walt is worn out after too many miles behind the wheel, his right leg just about numb despite a reliance on cruise control. Driving south, he struggles to remain alert as he finds himself in the middle of a typically insane South Florida morning commute. Trying to listen closely to a CD only complicates matters. "The Peptide Bond is a condensation reaction formed by the exclusion of H₂O between two amino acids..."

But he is defenseless against Dr. Phillips' droning voice and his mind soon wanders. He steers his beat up Corolla down an off ramp. He is close to his destination, knows the directions by heart. Bottom of the ramp, right turn, six blocks, left turn, twelve blocks, right turn—middle of the block. Surveying the bleak surroundings, Walt shakes his head. Block after block of gray derelict buildings, desolate and hollow, the sound of gunshots not uncommon. How Eddie survives in this shithole is beyond me, he thinks.

Miami's appeal always eluded Walt. He drives through Liberty City on the city's north side, a neighborhood dominated by poverty, drugs, violence and hopelessness. Yet just cross MacArthur Causeway, over

the pristine aqua hue of Biscayne Bay, is South Beach, a destination known for immense wealth, uber-hip clubs, fashion and dreams. Liberty City is Richard Wright, South Beach is F. Scott Fitzgerald—forties and crack or cosmos and coke. The idealist in Walt has trouble squaring the dichotomy.

He makes the final right turn and parks in the middle of the block, his Corolla nondescript among the aging wrecks that line the pot-holed street. The sidewalks, neutral zones between the dilapidated buildings and the road, are buckled, cracked and strewn with garbage. The luminous morning sun, out of place in the drab gray landscape, shines brightly down the narrow urban canyon between the two and three-story projects. The stillness at this early hour is disconcerting to Walt.

He gets out of his car, stretches his legs, and walks purposefully down the block to the entrance of a run-down apartment building. His brown hair is neatly trimmed, a proper contrast to his five-o'clock shadow and sad, hangdog eyes, bloodshot from a lack of REM sleep. He wears dressy jeans that have held their crease after a five and a half hour drive, penny loafers—a gift from his dad—and a green Izod fashionably untucked, his attempt at Hamptons cool that, in this neighborhood, simply announces white privilege. He carries a small cardboard box tucked under his arm.

A hooker in gold lamé micro-shorts, a black bra with no shirt, and matching knee-high black boots walks out of the building and stops not a foot in front of him. She circles her bright ruby lips with the tip of her tongue. "Hey, baby, you lost?" she queries, a smile crossing those lips as she runs a bejeweled hand up one thigh before it settles over her crotch. "Wanna have some fun, Sugar?" Her eyes lock on the box beneath his arm. "Watcha got there?"

Walt presses his arm against the box and rushes past with a quick smile and terse "No thanks." He's been down here enough times to know not to engage with folks. The most innocent of encounters in this environment can quickly turn acidic.

He enters the building and trudges up a dark stairwell to the third-floor. A lone bulb hangs by a bare wire, the only illumination in the long hallway. The rooms aren't marked and he knows just to count doors from the stairs. One, two, three, four, five, six—this is it.

The door is open a crack and Walt looks in. "Eddie?" he half-whispers. The room is dim, sparsely furnished, and silent. It reeks of puke, and

worse. Eddie sits atop a filthy mattress on the floor in the corner, naked. He leans against a pockmarked wall, his head bowed, chin on chest. A police siren blares in the distance. Eddie mumbles.

Walt enters and strides across the floor to the window. He notices but isn't bothered by the fetid odor. He fumbles with the draw cord of the cheap horizontal blinds. When he feels the plastic knob brush gently across his knuckles, he yanks down and the sunbeams surge through the slats as daylight permeates the room.

"Wha' da fuck...?" Eddie slurs. His eyes are sunken, dark, his skin sallow and waxy, his body rail thin. Long strands of greasy hair are matted on his forehead and hollow cheeks. Both forearms are a triple-A map of tracks, scabs, and bruises. Green crud is caked in the corners of his mouth and eyes. "Walt? That you?" Dried saliva clings like moss to his chin.

"Yeah bro, it's me." Walt bends down, places the box on the floor next to the bed, and tucks a dirty blanket around Eddie. He walks over to a sink on the far wall, grabs one of Eddie's t-shirts off the floor, turns on the faucet and soaks the shirt. He wrings it out in the sink, walks back to the bed, and sits next to Eddie.

"Look at me," he instructs Eddie. Eddie turns his head. Walt lays an arm across his shoulders. With familial tenderness, he carefully wipes the crud and saliva off Eddie's face with the t-shirt.

On the mattress next to Eddie, inside an open, worn leather case, is a dirty hypodermic, its tip clotted with dried blood. Neatly packaged alongside it is the rest of Eddie's works—bent spoon, several Q-tips, a length of medical tubing, and a Zippo lighter. The organization of his works goes against the overall theme of chaos in the room.

Walt stares at the needle. "That it?" he asks. "Your last one?"

"Yup. You brought more, right?"

"Maybe. You haven't been sharing have you?"

Eddie hesitates. "Nope. You brought more, right?"

Walt stares at Eddie. "No. Remember our deal? No sharing."

"Liar. You brought more, right? What's in the box?"

"I'm serious Eddie, this—"

"Aw Walt, come on, no lectures... please?"

Walt stiffens a bit, sighs. "No lectures Eddie. But I'm not here to help you kill yourself. Quite the opposite."

"You don't care about me," Eddie says as he turns his head away, petulant, like a child—textbook addict manipulation.

"Yes, that's why I just drove half the night to see you in this shithole you keep coming back to, not to mention opening myself up to several class-A felonies." Walt stands up and begins to shuffle somewhat aimlessly about the room. "Fine, don't listen to me. And yes, there's a month's supply of clean needles in the box and a hundred bucks worth of fast food cards. Would you please eat something? And call me when you're ready to make a change, I can get you in somewhere. You're not alone in this you know, and you need help."

But aside from Walt's concern Eddie really was alone. Eddie had taken a long hard fall, the kind that even alienates blood kin. Their parents long ago disowned Eddie, they had to, appearances and all. Walt rarely brought up the subject. "My God, what would the neighbors think?" Mom would recite while drunkenly sloshing Crown and Coke on the Brazilian granite in their sterile, stainless steel kitchen, her arms dramatically sweeping outward in a wide arc to indicate the Joneses and Smiths beyond the pool and over the hedge, all safely ensconced behind the gates of their conservative milieu.

Walt sees through their middle-class hypocrisy and belligerent denial of responsibility, though he understands it. Eddie has fucked-up beyond fucking-up, setting the fucking-up bar so high even Dr. Phil would have to shake his head. Still, Eddie is his big brother, the one guy who always believed in him, looked out for him, protected him. To abandon him now would in his mind be criminal, if not downright immoral.

Walt stops his aimless shuffling, leans over Eddie, kisses him on the head, stuffs a couple twenties in his hand, and walks to the door. "I love you Eddie, but I've got a five and half hour drive up to Gainesville. Afternoon class. There's no such thing as tardy in med school."

Walt pauses at the door, then quickly walks back to Eddie, leans down again, embraces him, and kisses him on the cheek. "I know this is not what defines you," he whispers in Eddie's ear. "You are not the worst thing you've ever done." He hopes he doesn't sound cliché, or worse, insincere.

Walt walks back to the door. Eddie tosses the cash on the bed like a couple of empty gum wrappers, then eagerly scoops up the box of needles. He never looks up.

Walt walks out the door into the dreary hallway and starts counting back to the stairwell, six, five, four, hears Eddie tearing open the box of hypos and quickens his pace, three, two, one, and pushes open the stairwell door. He takes the steps two at a time and is soon on the bottom floor. He exits the building into the blinding glare of the still rising sun. Slightly disoriented by the sudden radiance he squints in the direction of his car and quickly walks the half block.

At the driver's door Walt fishes around in his pocket for the keys before opening the door and sitting in the cheap vinyl bucket seat. He locks the door.

Finally able to relax, he breathes heavily as sweat seeps from his skull, drips down his forehead and neck, and is absorbed into the cotton fabric of his shirt. He stares passively through the windshield and his sight begins to blur as tears pool in his eyes. His back tightens and he cups a palm over his trembling mouth. His body convulses as tears overflow the sockets, his muffled cries non-existent to the outside world.

When the tears finally give out, he wipes his eyes with the back of his wrist, twists the rearview and checks his face. He starts the car.

"The Peptide Bond has a partial double-bond character." Walt grins, actually happy to hear the familiar Phillips' monotone.

He turns the car around and drives down the street. Left turn, twelve blocks, right turn, six blocks, left turn, hop on the highway. Go three hundred miles.

Soon he'll be back at medical school with all its attendant worries and stresses, the backbiting, the competition, the sleep deprivation, the all out war for just the slightest hint of recognition from even the most junior member of the faculty. Double bonus points if they remember your name. He can't wait.

Walt turns onto the highway, leans on the gas, and raises the volume of the lecture. He glances in the rearview and then focuses on the long journey ahead of him.