

STUFF OF DREAMS

BY LEWIS SHINER

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“IF IT GETS to be too much,” Matheson told me, “you can always bail out. Like this.”

He clenched his fists and folded his arms in an X across his chest. With his white intern’s smock and his unkempt wiry hair, he looked like he was getting ready to step out on the karate mat.

“You just cross your arms and duck your head and you’ll come out of it. Sort of like a fetal position, only you’re standing up. I don’t know why it works, but it does.”

“What do you mean,” I asked, “‘too much?’”

Matheson shrugged. “You’ve got to understand. This isn’t just lights and colors we’re talking about here. You’re going across into a whole other world, even if it is inside your head. It gets more real every time you take the stuff. It’s going to have its own people, own rules, everything. You may find yourself in a situation you want out of, that’s all. Hell, didn’t you ever wish you could just turn off an acid trip?”

I nodded, looking at the small plastic pouch he’d given me. It was like a Tubex system, with five small doses of the drug and a steel plunger unit. Adonine, he’d called it.

“And you don’t know anything about it?”

Matheson shook his head impatiently. We were in the middle of the hallway, right by the nurses’ station, and I could understand why he was uncomfortable. “I sent a sample to PharmChem last week,” he said. “It was a stat order, so I should get the analysis in a couple more days. That should answer all your questions.”

I was just making excuses and I knew it. It was time for my rounds, and I didn’t want to get caught in the middle of a drug deal either. So I handed Matheson a twenty and put the package in my coat pocket.

Matheson winked as he tucked the bill away. “You won’t be sorry,” he promised. “It’s a real trip.”

THAT NIGHT I went across for the first time.

I closed the blinds on the gently falling snow outside and sat on the edge of my bed. Everything I needed was laid out on the night table beside me, but I still hadn’t made up my mind whether I was going to go through with it or not.

It was one thing for Matheson and another for me. Matheson wasn’t afraid of drugs, had even used heroin off and on for several years. I’d used the usual chemicals in undergraduate school, and when I’d gotten into med school I’d

sometimes taken speed in the morning and Valium at night. But never to the point of dependence, and I'd never liked using needles on myself.

But Matheson said this was special, and since Sarah had moved out it didn't make much difference anyway. I'd been losing interest in everything, and some kind of desperate measures were in order.

Even this.

The plunger assembly screwed together easily, and the plastic sheath popped off the needle with a little pressure from my thumbnail. I tied off with a piece of surgical tubing and made a fist with my left hand. When I patted the inside of my elbow, the vein rose up fat and blue.

I swabbed the vein, and the touch of the alcohol made my whole arm go cold. When I held the assembly up to the light, the silvery drug seemed to roll in the syringe like a glob of mercury. I squeezed out the bubble of gas and watched the first drop roll down the shaft of the needle.

My arm was starting to go numb. I had to make up my mind. Setting my teeth, I put the needle into my arm.

I eased the plunger back a fraction with my thumb and watched purple ribbons of blood swirl into the silvery liquid. The sight of it nearly made me sick, but I pushed the plunger in all the way, just the same.

THE CITY STRETCHED OUT in front of me like a deserted movie set. Low white buildings, some with short towers and domes, spread across a broad plain and ran halfway up a nearby hill. Everything had an unfinished look, as if it had been built from sketches or rough cardboard models.

I turned slowly around. Behind me a path led into a sparse forest and disappeared. To either side a broad, deserted highway ran unbroken to the horizon. I was standing at the head of a walled footbridge that crossed about 20 feet above the highway.

I sniffed the air and tasted freshness, a clean smell like sun-dried clothes. I felt slightly high, but my head was clear, and I knew I was having some kind of dream experience. It just didn't seem important at the time.

Nothing else moved. The highway was unused, the sidewalks were empty, even the pale blue-white sky was completely clear. On second look, it was obvious that no one had ever lived in the city, not in its present condition, anyway. What had seemed to be doors and windows were only recesses in the solid walls and didn't open into anything.

I reached out and touched the wall that edged the overpass. It gave a little under my hand, like Styrofoam. I took a couple of tentative steps out onto the walkway, and it seemed to hold my weight well enough. On the other side, a narrow lane wandered down into the center of the city.

As I walked slowly down the street, I noticed how comfortable everything was. The feeling was like *deja vu*, but without any of the frightening overtones. I felt pretty sure I had dreamed something similar before, possibly even lived in a city like it when I was growing up. Whatever the reason, I seemed to know my way around already and knew what I was going to see around every corner. I stumbled once, falling against the side of a building. The light cotton clothes I wore weren't even torn, but I did feel the impact in my shoulder.

The vividness of it surprised me and I stopped and pinched myself, the way you're supposed to do in dreams. It hurt, but nothing changed in the city around me. If the pain is real, I thought, maybe injury is real, too. Maybe that's what Matheson meant by "too much."

It seemed to me that I walked for at least three or four hours. Even though there wasn't anything to see, only the monotony of white buildings and narrow streets, I couldn't seem to get bored with it. I didn't get physically tired either, or hungry, or thirsty. My body seemed to run like a finely tuned machine.

Then, suddenly, it ended. A wave of dizziness hit me and I leaned against a wall to steady myself. While I watched, my hand turned transparent and I looked down to see my legs fading away. A moment later I was in my bed, exhausted and disoriented, but awake.

I lay there for a minute or two, eventually realizing that I was staring at my bedside clock. It took another little while for me to make sense of the hands and see that I'd only been across for an hour of objective time.

I got up for a glass of water, and after a couple of minutes I could tell that I wasn't about to go back to sleep. I took 30 milligrams of Dalmane, and after about half an hour I managed to drift off.

“**F**ANTASTIC,” I SAID to Matheson the next day. We were eating in the cafeteria, but I didn't have much appetite. The Dalmane, with its long half-life, was keeping me relaxed, but I could still feel the excitement of the night before. “I mean, nothing really happened, but the sensations...just incredible.”

Matheson's smile twitched. “Sure,” he said. He was playing nervously with his silverware and his eyes were shot with red. “That's because this city of yours is like, well, a model of your subconscious. If you could take the inside of your head and build it in 3D, that's what it would look like. That's why you're so comfortable there.”

“Where do you go? The same place?”

“No. For me it's something more...primitive. Somebody else could be on a beach or in a little town in Ohio. Somehow the stuff is tapping into your memories or dream centers or something like that.”

“Where did you get it?”

“You remember a guy named Davis, intern, just transferred down to St. Mary's? He turned me on to it.”

“Where did he get it?”

Matheson smiled that nervous smile again. It was starting to make me uncomfortable. “I guess he wouldn't mind my telling you. Davis introduced me to him down at the Pub one night. Calls himself Smith. Weird little guy, short and pudgy, lots of fat around his neck, kind of gray-brown skin. I don't know where the hell he comes from.”

“Does he cook it up himself?”

“Who knows? He's the ultimate source of all of it I've ever seen. Ask him about it yourself if you want to. He's there two or three times a week.” Matheson's eyes were darting back and forth again, and the same piece of food

had been pinned on his fork for two minutes.

“What about...” I struggled for the right word, “side effects?”

“Blake, you worry too much.”

“That’s not much of an answer.”

“Okay, there’s a little risk. There’s a little risk in everything.”

“What’s the risk in this? Specifically.”

Matheson shrugged, said, “Dependency,” and looked at his food long enough to eat the bite on his fork. “But it’s not the kind of big deal you want to make it out to be. If you want to stop, you can stop.”

Right, I thought. How many junkies do I know that tell me they’re not hooked?

“I had some trouble getting to sleep last night,” I said. “You know, afterwards.”

Matheson nodded. “Yeah, that happens. Just use some Valium or something. You’ll be all right.”

I couldn’t place what it was about Matheson that was bothering me. But then I hadn’t had enough sleep, and there was an edginess under the fatigue that might have been the Dalmane wearing off. It could have just been me.

THE DAMP HEAT from the radiators gave the hospital an ancient, sour smell. One of the fluorescent tubes over the nurses’ station was flickering, so fast that the irritating effect was almost subliminal. When I got up to make my rounds that afternoon, the corridors seemed like narrow, dirty tunnels. Even the faces of the nurses were sliding into a dreary anonymity. I made it through the afternoon somehow and got Matheson to cover for me in case I was needed that night.

Once I was back in the apartment the fatigue seemed to burn away. More sleep, I decided. If I took the drug earlier, I’d have more time to recover before going back to the hospital.

I ate a little, almost by reflex, and took a shower. Then I went to bed and put another dose of Adonine in my vein.

THE CITY WAS coming to life.

It hadn’t made it all the way yet, but the buildings had grown-real doors and windows, and I could sense movement behind them. The sky was a deeper blue, and for the first time I realized that there was no sun in it, just an unbroken dome of color.

There was a coolness in the air that I could taste but couldn’t really feel, like springtime or early morning. Just outside the edge of my vision I could see blurs of motion, and I could hear the rippling of conversations without words.

I walked downhill, toward the center of town. None of the shadow people got within fifty feet of me, and the ones in the distance had the fuzziness of pictures taken with an unsteady hand. I could see they were wearing the same sort of loose clothes that I had on, but that was the only detail I could make out.

In the center of the valley the road split, one fork winding into the hills to my left and the other continuing on. A small, barren park had grown up in the

center of the Y since the night before, complete with benches and leafless trees. The ground had the color of infield dirt on a baseball diamond, but was hard-packed and dry.

I sat down and closed my eyes, wondering what would happen if I fell asleep. A dream within a dream?

Sleep didn't come. So I experimented with controlling the dream itself. I tried to bring one of the people closer to me, just by concentrating, but it didn't work. Nothing happened when I tried to will changes in the buildings or the trees, either. The shape of the city was either coming right out of the drug, or from some unconscious level of my own mind.

My scientific curiosity didn't last long. Like anything else associated with the waking world, it seemed irrelevant in the city. I got up and started walking again, aware just below conscious thought that I was looking for something. I followed the branch of the road that led through the valley, looking at the buildings. I didn't pay much attention to the blur of people on the streets, even though there seemed to be more of them every minute.

Individual houses out of the jumbled architecture looked familiar. The land on either side of the street rose as I got farther from the center of the city, and it was on one of these low hills that I saw a house I was sure I knew. It was two stories high, white as all the others, but with a square ledge between floors that ran all the way around the building. The slope leading up to it appeared rocky from a distance, but close up turned out to be made of the same hard, uniform substance as the ground in the park.

I sat down and waited without being sure why. After what seemed like half an hour a single figure detached itself from the crowd and climbed the long stairway up to the house.

It was a woman, and she was more nearly in focus than anyone I'd seen thus far. I'd never laid eyes on her before but she was as familiar as my own reflection. Her hair and eyes were a dusty tan, the color of the slope behind her. Her body was wide in the shoulders and hips, but her waist was narrow and her breasts were small.

She turned at the top of the steps and looked at me just long enough to let me know she'd seen me. Then she turned and went into the building.

I waited for her outside. Without drifting clouds or a moving sun I had no idea of how much time passed. When she came out again I followed.

She had the same elusive, flowing walk as the others in the city, and it was hard for me to keep up with her. More and more people were appearing on the sidewalk in ones and twos, and they were no longer staying out of my way. I had to weave around them, nearly breaking into a run to keep the woman in sight. Still she kept putting distance between us and finally disappeared when two people stepped out of a doorway as she passed.

She was gone without a trace, without an alley or a storefront to have ducked into. I circled the block twice, and when I was sure she was gone, I wandered back toward the park.

The sight of her had aroused something in me, something sexual. but also a deeper sort of longing that I couldn't really pin down. I sat on the bench, and before long things seemed to heel over sideways and I came back across.

A GAIN THE EXPERIENCE had only lasted an hour, even though the subjective time had been even longer than the night before. My body was limp with fatigue, and when I got up to take some Valium, the room did a slow roll.

I swallowed two 5-mg tablets and went back to bed, but an hour later I was still awake. Things seemed fuzzy and distant, and I felt cranky as an exhausted child. I took 500 mg of Placidyl and left the problem of waking up for the next morning.

S NOW HAD BEEN FALLING all night and the roads were buried in slush. Putting the chains on my tires turned into a contest of wills that I almost lost. I kept the heater of the little Volkswagen turned up all the way while I drove to the hospital, and I still couldn't get warm.

All through morning report I kept glancing over at Matheson. He was in bad shape, bleary-eyed and jittery, as if he'd been shooting amphetamine for a week. The chief of staff was presenting a case of tricyclic antidepressant overdose, and I was bored right through my exhaustion. My eyes kept wandering to Matheson, then to the yellowing walls, the scarred gray tile, and the peeling veneer of the conference table.

It was late afternoon before I found Matheson alone, and even then he was so distracted that I had to struggle to keep his attention. His behavior was irritating, but the residual Valium kept it from bothering me too badly. I finally got him to agree to slip away to the Pub for a few minutes. We got our coats, and both of us had them on and buttoned before the elevator stopped at the ground floor. I caught him looking at me.

"Hypothermia?" I asked.

He nodded. "I'm always running a fever when I come out of it. The next day I might get as low as 95."

The bar was on the other side of the street from the hospital and we crossed in the middle of the block. Dark gray mounds of snow were clotted on the edges of the sidewalks.

"How long have you been taking it?" I asked him.

"Week and a half."

"Every night?"

He looked at me strangely, then glanced away. He nodded.

The Pub was already crowded. Everybody from premeds at the university to senior residents hung out there, and the tables were packed tighter than boats full of refugees. I stood with Matheson at the bar and tried to shut out the throbbing voices and burning cigarette smoke. I was feeling nauseated, but ordered a beer anyway. Matheson didn't want anything.

I stared into the foaming yellow fluid for a minute, then blurted out, "Are you feeling okay?"

"I suppose I'm a little edgy, I guess. Yeah, edgy, why?"

"You look lousy, man. I think that drug is tearing you up."

"Hey, it's nothing. It's nothing. There's some rebound excitability, that's all."

He looked down at the bar, at his hands pounding out some strange rhythm, as if they didn't even belong to him. "Besides," he said. "It's worth it."

Suddenly he turned and stared at something across the room. "That's him," he said quietly. "Smith."

I followed Matheson's eyes and saw him in one of the booths. There was no mistaking him. He was too dark for a Mediterranean, but he had a green-gray cast to his skin that I'd never seen in an African. His head was bullet-shaped, totally hairless, and his neck looked like an uneven stack of pancakes. His small, pudgy eyes seemed to roll back and forth between the people he was talking to, and there was something about him that I didn't like at all.

I turned back to Matheson. The noise and the damp smell of crowded humanity was getting to me. "I don't like this," I told him. "I'm getting out."

Matheson shrugged. "Do what you want."

I COULDN'T SLEEP.

I'd stayed at the hospital past midnight, determined to exhaust myself so I could sleep without using Adonine. One good night's sleep, I was sure, would take care of the physical problems I'd been having and would prove that I could do without the drug.

I choked down half a sandwich and went to bed, but it was no good. I took 50 mg of Seconal, and another 50 half an hour later. My spine was humming like a power line, and I had to pull extra blankets down from the closet in order to get warm. The small noises of the apartment—creaking floors, whistling in the water pipes—made me jump uncontrollably.

I'd been constipated for two days, but that night my bowels turned to water.

I was a walking textbook of withdrawal symptoms. After only two days on the drug. "Rebound excitability," Matheson had said. My ass.

The Seconal was making my stomach flutter, and the sheets felt like they were made out of sandpaper. I started telling myself all the things that people tell themselves in that kind of situation. Like how I was going to get myself some real help, that I was going to talk to Matheson and get off the stuff for good. First thing in the morning.

That was when I got the hypo kit out and loaded up another dose.

CARS HAD COME to the city. They were red and blue and bright green, and from where I stood on the footbridge they looked like the toy cars I'd had as a kid.

For the longest time I just stood there, watching the cars slowly slipping under me, unable to see anyone inside them. For the first time that day my body temperature felt normal, my bowels didn't hurt, and my hands were lying still.

It was an acute physical pleasure just to be alive. On this side of the drug, anyway. I wondered how sick and screwed up I would have to get on the other side before it started leaking through.

Eventually I walked downtown to the park. The trees had grown uniform

light-green leaves, and a carpet of yellowish grass had spread over the ground. I sat on the same bench, searching each passing group of people for the woman but not finding her.

Everyone had faces this time, regular features that didn't belong to anyone I knew in the waking world. I felt I knew something about each of them just from the way they looked, a sense of how they would react if I spoke to them. Occasionally their eyes would flicker in my direction, then pass on.

Two men sat on a bench across from me and started playing some sort of card game. Instead of a standard four-suit deck, they were using cards with stylized paintings on the faces—chickens, rabbits, bears. I couldn't make any sense of the game, even to the point of knowing who would play next.

For the first time I felt a loss of control, a sense that something was going on that I didn't understand. It suddenly became clear to me that the city was reality for the people who lived in it. They were self-conscious entities, not just Disney robots there to put on a show for me.

The thought made me distinctly uncomfortable.

I got up and walked past the card players. One of them glanced up at me quickly, then went back to the game. He turned up a card with a dog on its face, and the animal seemed to have a sinister significance.

I stayed on the low road, headed for the house where I'd seen the brown-haired woman. The streets were crowded, and this time the other people on the sidewalks were noticing me, stepping out of my way and changing directions to avoid me. It was as if I were becoming more real to them instead of the other way around.

There were no cars on the streets, and the entire level of technology in the city seemed lower than that of the highway that ran past it. I saw pushcarts, and even a sort of rickshaw, but no horses or mules. Or for that matter, birds, dogs, cats, or insects.

When I got to the woman's house I sat and waited again, but it was only a few moments before I saw her standing in the doorway. Her mouth was moving, trying to form words or maybe just wavering in and out of a smile. She made a curious gesture with her hand, twisting her wrist as she raised it, then quickly dropped it again. I got the meaning, though, and began climbing the steps toward her. She waited until I reached the top, then turned and went into the house.

The front room looked like a modern museum before the art was moved in. The walls were white and the windows were simply openings to the outside, without glass or shutters. The furniture was like everything else in the city—white and squared off, without ornament. The chairs were cubes of some porous material, and what must have been a couch or bed was just an oblong of the same stuff.

The woman motioned toward the longer block and I sat down on it. It was softer than it looked, with a texture like very dense foam rubber. The woman sat at the other end of it, maybe two or three feet away. Her eyes were ringed in black, making them seem to leap out at me. Her nose was small and bent, like a tiny beak, and her lips were thin and sharply defined.

"Who are you?" I asked her. It was the first time I'd tried to say anything

on the other side, and the words seemed to waver a little as they came out.

She shook her head at me, bouncing her short, tangled hair. Her mouth was working again, but she didn't smile. From somewhere out of sight she came up with a deck of the same cards that the men in the park had been using. She started to deal them out, and when I held up a hand to stop her, she ignored me.

"I don't understand this game," I told her. She shook her head again and finished dealing. The cards were laid out in the shape of a five-pointed star. She reached out and turned over the top card of one of the piles. The face of the card showed a snake's head.

She seemed to be waiting for something, and so I reached for one of the piles. She stopped my hand and held on to it. I felt a slow excitement building in my chest and thighs. I looked into her face and saw no resistance. Leaning across the cards, I took her face in my other hand and kissed her.

Her mouth moved under mine with a sort of abstracted passion. I got up and stood in front of her and tried to pull her into an embrace, but she rested her head against my chest. The feel of her was light and vaguely electric, as if a mild current were running across her skin.

I tried to turn her face toward me, but she pulled away and began gathering up the cards. When they were in one pile her hands seemed to swallow them. She touched my face and went back out the front door.

I lay down in the coolness of the room, remembering dark, snowy mornings, the grimness of the hospital, the squalor of my apartment, all with the detachment of someone looking at last night's dreams. When the images began, I was sure I was going back across to wake up again, but it didn't happen.

I lay there for what seemed like hours, then finally got up to walk the streets again. The subjective time I spent in the city was growing with every dose of the drug. When I finally did begin to fade, I felt like I'd spent a full day in the city. I didn't even sense the transition as I went back across. The Adonine had cleared up the withdrawal symptoms, and the Seconal I'd already taken dropped me into a dreamless sleep.

“I GOT THE ANALYSIS today,” Matheson said. He didn't seem happy about it, but then he wasn't in any shape to be happy about anything. The orbits of his eyes looked bruised and the skin on his hands was translucent. If he'd come into Emergency looking that way, they would have started feeding him intravenously on the spot.

We went into the conference room and shut the door. He pulled an envelope from his pocket and tossed me a few sheets of paper. They were the standard charts and graphs that PharmChem always did—high pressure liquid chromatography, UV spectroscopy, and so on. I was shivering and depressed, and couldn't concentrate on the needle-like peaks on the paper.

"They separated out two fractions," Matheson said. "One proteinaceous, the other RNA."

"What does it all mean?" I asked.

"It's a virus," Matheson said.

“What?”

“A virus,” he repeated. “A short-lived, non-contagious virus. The virions are small enough to cross the blood-brain barrier and hook on to some form of receptor in the brainstem. Then they shoot a load of RNA into the cells.”

“Holy Christ,” I said. I was picturing a drawing from one of my college textbooks, showing the virion crouched over a cell, long, spidery legs plugged into the receptor, its bulbous head bent down to the cell wall and its beak rapping the cell, the coiled strands of RNA spurting out of it.

That was what I’d been doing to my brain.

“The narcotic effects,” Matheson went on, “seem to come from the protein coat, which floats off into the cerebro-spinal fluid after the virus has shot its wad.”

“What,” I asked, fighting nausea, “does the RNA do when it gets in there?”

“They don’t know. There was a note with the analysis, from the technician who ran the tests. He said they weren’t set up to do any more, but he was interested and had kept out a sample to run some tests of his own.”

“Something must have caught his attention.”

“You’re damn right it did. Thirty percent of the amino acids in the protein coat are optically backwards. On top of that, the nitrogens in what should have been the cytosine residues are in the wrong places. This shit is bizarre. It’s like it came from another planet.”

I had a sudden vision of Smith, his beady eyes and strange, oily skin. I was wearing long underwear and heavy clothes to fight the hypothermia, but I still felt a chill run straight through me.

“Matheson,” I said. He had been about to walk away. “I—tried to do without it last night. I couldn’t.”

He nodded distractedly, “You’ve been across what, three times? It’ll sort itself out. You’ll get used to it. You want me to get you some more?”

His casual attitude put me off and I didn’t answer him for a minute.

“Well?”

“All right,” I said at last. “Get me some more.”

I LEFT THE WARD at 10:30 that night. I was in no shape to deal with patients, but I’d muddled through the day somehow. I had only enough concentration to take care of what was directly in front of me, and the world had closed down to the moment and the area of space I was occupying. The feeling of dirtiness around me had gotten worse, and even while part of my brain was trying to tell me it wasn’t real, the rest of my mind was recoiling from it. I could barely remember what happened when I took the drug; all I had was the vague knowledge that when the day was over I would take it again.

I’d left the heater blazing all day and the apartment was like a sauna. I didn’t even bother to eat anything since I would have lost it to the diarrhea anyway. After showering I wiped the thick steam off the bathroom mirror and looked at myself.

I was in nearly as bad a shape as Matheson. Loose skin hung off the washboard of my ribcage. My elbows and knees looked swollen compared to

the arms and legs they clung to. My face was as dull and expressionless as a wooden mask.

I toweled off and got into bed. The empty syringe from the night before was still lying on the bedside table. I stared at it for a long time before fitting a new unit dose into the holder. Then I swallowed two of the 50-mg Seconals so I wouldn't wake up when the drug wore off.

The red-brown beginnings of a bruise discolored the inside of my elbow where I'd done a bad job the night before. I had to tie off my other arm and give myself the shot left-handed.

Virus, I thought, as I watched the blood mixing with the thick, metallic drug. A wave of nausea went over me, and my right hand clenched the sheets up into a knot. I pushed the plunger home.

IT WAS LIKE waking up from a bout with the flu to find my fever broken and the sun shining. I stood at the end of the footbridge and breathed the sweet-smelling air that blew out of the trees. The miseries of the day seemed to seep out of me and right on into space. I remembered everything that had happened, right up to the needle sliding into my arm, and it all seemed clearer to me than when it had actually been going on.

But that was another world. I couldn't even think of it as the real world, not any more.

Instead of going into the city, I turned and followed the dirt road into the trees. Dry, summery-looking leaves had sprung out everywhere. Once it was out of sight of the city, the road turned parallel to the highway and led downhill. A few hundred yards along it I came to a shallow, clear stream. Trees ran along both banks, and rocks arched the river into spray and foam. It was right where I'd known it would be, and I got out of my clothes and waded into it.

The woman appeared from somewhere in the trees and sat on the bank watching me. I tried to get her to join me, but she didn't seem to understand what I wanted. Finally I got out of the water and lay on the bank beside her. She touched my stomach and her fingers gave me that strange, tingling sensation again. I pulled her down to kiss her, but after a moment she eased back and lay down a little farther away. An alienness about her kept me from pursuing her, even though I was aroused and wanted her.

"Can you understand me today?" I asked her. My voice sounded clearer to me, but still wasn't coming through for her. She shook her head.

It felt like a long summer afternoon that we spent there by the river. Sometimes she would sketch stylized figures in the dirt; sometimes I would go back in the water and swim. Then, without any kind of warning, she got to her feet and walked away. I dressed and followed her, but she was still faster than I was, and she had disappeared by the time I reached the overpass.

It didn't seem to matter. I went back to the park and sat for a while on the bench. As I sat there, relaxed, staring into the empty sky, I realized that the time I spent in the city was now the only time I had to think things out. If any intelligent decisions were to be made, it had to be then and there. The first decision I had to, make was whether or not I was willing to give the stuff up.

After that came the question of whether or not I would be able to.

I was still trying to sort it all out when a sudden flash of movement caught my eye. Someone had just ducked into a side street, and the motion riveted my attention. City people didn't move that way.

I got up and ran to the alley for a look. The people I passed almost seemed to resent my moving so quickly, turning to stare at me with narrowed eyes. I ignored them and turned the corner just in time to see a heavysset figure disappearing around the next block.

I would have known him anywhere. It was the man Matheson called Smith.

I ran after him. When I rounded the corner I saw him knocking at one of the doors that faced the street. He was looking around anxiously, and I ducked back out of sight. When I leaned out for another look, he was gone.

I moved to the window of the building and peeked inside. Like all the windows in the city, it was just an open place in the wall, and I found myself staring right at Smith's back. In the shadows beyond him stood one of the city's people, dressed in the usual light pants and shirt. There was a look of eagerness on his face that I'd never seen in any of them before. He was concentrating on something in Smith's hand, and I craned my neck for a better view of it.

It was a plastic pouch of Adonine. At that instant the city man raised his eyes and saw me, and Smith followed the direction of his gaze. He turned his bulk around to face me and focused his flat, piggish stare on me.

I looked from Smith to the Adonine, my mind filling with questions. But it was too late for answers. I could already feel the tingling in my legs that meant the drug was wearing off. I tried to fight it, but the force pulling me back was too strong. In a moment I had faded completely away.

MATHESON DIDN'T SHOW UP for morning report. I was groggy from the Seconal, but I'd taken a Valium anyway to try and take the edge off my nerves. It had made me calmer, but it hadn't helped the fuzziness in my brain. I couldn't seem to shake the delusion that I was working in a decaying zoo, not a hospital. Why doesn't somebody clean the cages? I kept wondering.

If it kept up I was going to need something stronger than Valium. Thorazine, maybe.

No, I told myself. Not Thorazine. I'm not crazy.

Between the withdrawal symptoms and worry over Matheson I was a wreck by the end of morning report.

"Blake."

It was my name. The sound of it had startled me so badly my leg had jumped into the table. If it hadn't been for the Valium, I would probably have gone completely to pieces.

"Yes?" I said.

"Stay here a minute," the chief resident told me. "I want to talk to you."

Christ, I thought. He *knows*. They all must know.

"You look terrible, doctor," he said. "What's wrong with you?" He had a face like a kindly old GP, but it seemed to me like he was smiling with some

sort of secret pleasure.

“Ocelots...” I said. It came out as a mumble, but I was terrified by the loss of control.

“What?”

I cleared my throat and tried again. “I’m not...sleeping too well, that’s all. Nothing else. Nothing wrong.”

“I’ve heard you’ve had some personal problems lately,” he said. Was he talking about Sarah? Or something else? What was he after?

“Some, sir,” I said. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“All right,” he said. “I’ll take your word for it. But we can’t have our doctors running around here looking worse than the patients. Start taking care of yourself, will you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and Blake?”

“Yes, sir?” He had caught me just as I was turning and I had to casually reach for the table to steady myself.

“Do you know anything about Matheson? He’s still not here, and no one’s heard from him at the desk.”

I tried to concentrate on his eyes, tried to keep the parts of my body still. “No, sir,” I said. “I don’t know anything about it.”

He was wearing a strange look, and I knew he hadn’t believed me. He was after something, I was sure of it, but I didn’t know what it was.

“All right, Blake,” he said. “That’ll be all.”

MATHESON DIDN’T ANSWER his phone when I tried his apartment. I kept at it all morning, and when lunch break came I went looking for him.

Driving was bad. My concentration was even worse than the day before. From second to second I had to fight to remember where I was, what I was doing. I had the car heater on full, and it still wasn’t enough. I imagined I could feel tiny drafts blowing in from the edges of the windshield and doors. Traffic was heavy, and I might have made better time on foot, but I couldn’t face leaving the warmth of the car. When gaps formed in front of me, I accelerated too hard, and twice I nearly went off onto the sidewalk.

I finally skidded into a parking place next to Matheson’s car. Before I knew what I was doing, I had the door open and was searching the glove compartment for Adonine. I didn’t find any. So I slammed the car door and ran up the stairs. The effort left me exhausted and shaking in front of his door. I pounded on it and rang the bell, and when nobody answered I pried the ancient lock open with my pocketknife.

Except for a few details I could have been looking at my own apartment. It seemed unbelievably filthy to me. A narrow bed sagged at one end of the room, and a hot plate sat on top of a small icebox at the other. The walls were covered by tilting bookshelves, and a closet was stuffed with dirty clothes. The area around the bed was littered with empty Adonine cartridges.

The covers were heaped on the mattress, and the refrigerator was full of food, but Matheson was gone. And if he had any Adonine in the apartment, it

was gone too.

I went back for another look at the bed, pulling the blankets onto the floor. There, laid out between the sheets, was a pair of heavy wool pajamas, just as if the body that had been in them had vanished into the air. Tied loosely around one of the arms was a piece of surgical tubing.

NO ONE ON THE WARD had any idea where Matheson could be. I called St. Mary's long distance to find Davis, the only other user I knew. No one had heard of him.

With Matheson gone I had to stay on the ward all night. I never had a chance to get to the Pub and look for Smith, which meant no chance to get any more of the drug.

I was down to my last dose, and every time I thought about it, I started to panic all over again.

ICAME ACROSS that night gasping like a drowning man. I dropped to my knees and leaned my head against the cool stone of the overpass.

It was a relief to be able to think again. I remembered pieces of the day—Matheson's disappearance, the confrontation after morning report—and it seemed incredible to me that I'd managed to get through the day at all. Then I dismissed it, the way I would a bad nightmare, and went on to other things.

What bothered me most was seeing Smith in the city. It was the first time I had seen anyone from the waking universe on this side. If it had been Matheson, or my parents, or Sarah, it might have made sense. But, seeing Smith, I had the eerie premonition that he wasn't there because of any associations I'd had with him in the other world. I was sure that he was somehow part of the drug, part of the information carried by the RNA.

I had to know for sure. I walked into town to look for him.

I could sense a new feeling on the streets. For no specific reason I felt like I had become the center of attention everywhere I went. People seemed to be talking behind me as I walked by, and there was a murmur following me that sounded openly hostile.

The house where I'd seen Smith my last time across was deserted. I cut through the center of town to the woman's house, but it was empty too. Even the furniture was gone.

Back in the park I stood under a tree and watched the people moving by me. The streets were crowded now, and I could hardly walk without running into people. Whenever I touched any of them I felt the mild charge of contact, the way I had with the woman. Anyone I touched pulled away from me and turned to whisper to someone else.

After a few minutes I got tired of waiting and went out on the streets again. I don't know how long I'd been walking when I saw him, but he almost seemed to have been waiting for me. He was lounging against the wall of a building, apparently alone, and when I got within a block of him, he began to walk away. He didn't make any sign that he'd seen me, but I was sure he had. He stayed a block in front of me, sometimes seeming to want to look back at me, but never quite going through with it. When I picked up the pace a little,

so did he.

We'd been walking away from the center of town, at first, in the general direction of the woman's house. Then he'd turned right to return to the main avenue, and right again, taking us back the opposite way.

By the time we passed the park I sensed that something was happening. Fewer people were on the sidewalks ahead of us, and a constant murmur came from behind. I stopped, and ahead of me Smith leaned against a wall and waited. I started toward him, then turned in the middle of a step.

Thirty or forty of the citizens were following me. They all wore loose white clothing, all had fair hair and pale skin. An intensity about their faces frightened me. When I turned on them they stopped where they were, casually, and started talking among themselves. I couldn't hear their voices, but their eyes were still fixed on me. When I took a step toward them they held their ground, and when I backed away they moved slowly after me.

I turned and ran for Smith, but he was more agile than he looked and darted away down the block. I chased hard after him and heard the footsteps of the crowd following me.

We were almost to the footbridge over the highway. Smith stumbled with exhaustion and collapsed against a concrete retaining wall, his back to me. I slowed to a walk and stopped just behind him.

"Smith?" I said. "Turn around." He ignored me. I started to reach for him when something ominous in the noise of the crowd made me look back.

They were coming for me, like an army of zombies out of a horror film. Their flat, neutral eyes were locked on me, and they were shuffling forward with a deliberation that terrified me. I backed away from them instinctively, moving out onto the footbridge. They were only a few yards away when I heard another noise behind me and turned to see a second army of them coming out of the woods.

I suddenly knew what Matheson had been talking about. All my desire for answers went away, and the only thing I wanted was to be out of there.

I crossed my arms over my chest, ducked my chin, and squeezed my eyes shut.

When I opened them I was fading away and the crowd was dimming into blackness.

I came to in my bed, burning with fever. My skin was hot and tight, and my throat was cracking like a dry river bottom. I sat up, wanting to get up for water, but I never made it. Sleep fell on me like a warm avalanche.

THE DETAIL MAN from Sandoz had a card table set up outside the Emergency Room, giving away coffee and donuts. He was pushing Hydergine, which was supposed to help you if you were senile. That wasn't my problem. I asked him for some Mellaril samples, trying to keep my teeth from chattering. He got a narrow box out of his case and gave me a strip of ten-unit doses.

The tablets were light green, 100 mg, intended for advanced psychotics. I wasn't crazy, I knew that, but the symptoms were similar. Only the Seconal that was still in my system kept me calm enough to deal with the razor-cut

drug rep in his three-piece suit. As soon as I was out of his sight, I tore open one of the blister pacs and swallowed the pill dry.

By eight o'clock I was relaxed, and the visions of dirt and decay had started to recede. I managed a vaguely coherent presentation and even got through morning rounds without any real trouble.

I called Matheson's apartment twice during the morning, with no answer. I hadn't really expected any. I fought to keep myself from thinking about the fact that I was completely out of Adonine.

By lunchtime I couldn't think about anything else. I took another hundred milligrams of Mellaril and washed it down with hot coffee.

In the quiet hours of the afternoon I went through Matheson's locker in the conference room. When I didn't find anything I started pulling out his books and papers and dumping them on the floor, searching frantically for even a single dose of the drug.

"What are you doing?"

I whirled around to see a look of horror on the face of the charge nurse. I had a dreamlike vision of myself—red, swollen eyes, hollow cheeks, shaking hands and chattering teeth.

I ignored her, scooping the papers back into the locker and slamming the door on them. I pushed past her into the hallway and tried to keep from breaking into a run as I headed for the cafeteria. Sweat was running off of me, but I felt like there was ice in my stomach and I needed to pour something hot onto it.

THAT AFTERNOON I SAW a letter for Matheson in his box. It had a PharmChem return address on it, and so I slipped it in my pocket. The first chance I had I took it into the men's room and tore it open.

It was from the chemist who had done the first analysis. He'd been feeding the rest of the Adonine to rats, and he hadn't been ready for the results he'd gotten.

"I'm certain," he wrote, "that this drug is forcing reticular formation cells to make a reverse transcriptase. The fraction of rat brain homogenate from the reticular activating system contained not only the viral DNA, but a large quantity of radically altered DNA."

RNA was supposed to make protein. But if what the chemist was saying was true, this RNA was turning around and building new, abnormal DNA, and god only knew what that new DNA was doing to the cells of my brain, or what effect it was having on my perceptions.

"It is recommended in the strongest possible terms that you *do not* administer this substance to human subjects. As well as taking control of cellular metabolism, the drug is found to have an *extremely high* addiction liability."

So what else is new? I thought. I crumpled the letter and flushed it away.

AT SIX O'CLOCK I was pushing my way through the happy hour crowd at the Pub, looking for Smith. I had to shout at the bartender to get him to hear me, and when I finished the description, he said he had no

idea of who I was talking about. He gave me some coffee, but I couldn't swallow more than a sip of it. When I set the cup down on the bar, a kid was standing next to me.

"I've seen him," the kid said.

"Where?"

"In here sometimes. He was in here last night, talking to a friend of mine. I think he said he'd be back here tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow?" It was like a cold fist in the gut.

"That's what he said."

I walked away from him and went back out into the snow.

I kept it up as long as I could, working in a radius out from the hospital that took in every bar, restaurant and pizza joint in the circle. But before long the cold was just too much for me, leaving me shaking so badly I couldn't even walk. I drove back home through the thick, drifting flakes of snow, thinking about a city where there was no winter.

I took three more Mellarils and sat shivering under my blankets, waiting for them to work. The ticking of the snow against the windowpane took forever to fade, but sometime around dawn I finally dozed off.

I dreamed of the city, but I wasn't really there. It was like watching it through a glass-bottomed boat, or through a plastic bubble that I could press myself against and almost put my hand through, but not quite. It was as much comfort to me as a photograph of a lost girlfriend.

I called in sick the next morning and lay in bed, dazed from the drugs, shattered by a sense of emptiness and loss. Sometime in the afternoon I stumbled out of bed and dressed in the dim light reflected from the snow outside.

Even over long underwear and another layer of clothes, my shirt and pants hung loosely on me. My joints creaked when I moved, and my face belonged in Dachau.

I had to drive to the Pub; I couldn't walk it in that awful cold. I finally staggered in, sat in a back booth, and ordered coffee. I washed down a Mellaril with the first cup and sat back to wait.

I waited an endless time, a longer time than I was able to keep track of. When my cup was empty someone filled it, and I sipped at it again until it was dry.

With my coat and gloves on, sitting still, I was all right, but the world seemed to come and go. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten anything.

When Smith finally came in, I was nearly delirious, unable to tell if I was seeing him in a waking reality or in another drug-twisted dream. The place had somehow filled up around me, and Smith was about to disappear into the crowd.

I lurched to my feet and went after him.

"I need to talk to you," I whispered at him hoarsely.

He turned slowly, and those tiny, hot eyes went into me, burning me the way they had once before, somewhere else that I didn't quite remember.

"What?"

"I need to talk to you. Outside." I had to lean against the wall of a booth,

but otherwise I was all right.

“What about?” His face had no expression, was as slick and hard as blue-black clay.

“Adonine,” I said.

Smith turned to the two people he was with and muttered, “Excuse me. I’ll be just a second.”

I led the way to the back door. I could barely feel my feet and I had to move slowly to keep my balance. We went through the metal fire door, and the cold air poured over me like the water of a frozen lake.

“Now. What was it you wanted?” Smith’s voice was hollow and soft, as if it wasn’t really coming from his body.

“Adonine,” I croaked. “I’m an addict. I need help.”

He tilted his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Adonine!” I shouted. “The drug! Like you gave Matheson! Like you gave Davis!”

“Matheson?” he said, with a gentle sort of curiosity. “Davis? Am I supposed to know these people?”

“Don’t lie to me, you bastard!” I shouted, moving in on him. “You know what I’m talking about. Now give it to me!”

His eyes widened with fear. I grabbed the lapels of his coat and felt a sudden tingling. It was a sensation I’d had before, in a dream somewhere. He brushed my hands away.

“Get away from me,” he hissed. Sweat started out across his bald, tapering head, and he backed away.

“No more crap, Smith!” I shouted. “Give me the drug!”

I lunged for him again and missed, falling into the snow against the side of the building. Smith was glancing nervously from side to side, but he had nowhere to run. I was blocking his only way out. He backed up until he was spread-eagled against the back wall of the alley.

I grabbed him again and started to shake him. “The drug, Smith! Give me the drug!”

He screamed, and with a sudden movement he threw me aside. My head went into the pavement, stunning me for an instant. But I got up on my hands and knees and started for him again.

And froze.

“No,” I whispered. “No, no, it can’t be...”

But it was.

Smith’s eyes were closing and he was drawing into himself like a trapped animal. Then, very slowly, he folded his arms and tucked his head to his chest.

His body seemed to sparkle for a moment in the gray light of evening, then he was gone.