

Manhole 69

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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For the first few days all went well.

„Keep away from windows and don't think about it,“ Dr Neill told them. „As far as you're concerned it was just another compulsion. At eleven thirty or twelve go down to the gym and throw a ball around, play some table-tennis. At two they're running a film for you in the Neurology theatre. Read the papers for a couple of hours, put on some records. I'll be down at six. By seven you'll be in a manic swing.“

„Any chance of a sudden blackout, Doctor?“ Avery asked.

„Absolutely none,“ Neill said. „If you get tired, rest, of course. That's the one thing you'll probably have a little difficulty getting used to. Remember, you're still using only 3,500 calories, so your kinetic level—and you'll notice this most by day—will be about a third lower. You'll have to take things easier, make

allowances. Most of these have been programmed in for you, but start learning to play chess, focus that inner eye.“

Gorrell leaned forward. „Doctor,“ he asked, „if we want to, can we look out of the windows?“

Dr Neill smiled. „Don't worry,“ he said. „The wires are cut. You couldn't go to sleep now if you tried.“

Neill waited until the three men had left the lecture room on their way back to the Recreation Wing and then stepped down from the dais and shut the door. He was a short, broad-shouldered man in his fifties, with a sharp, impatient mouth and small features. He swung a chair out of the front row and straddled it deftly.

„Well?“ he asked.

Morley was sitting on one of the desks against the back wall, playing aimlessly with a pencil. At thirty he was the youngest member of the team working under Neill at the Clinic, but for some reason Neill liked to talk to him.

He saw Neill was waiting for an answer and shrugged.

„Everything seems to be all right,“ he said. „Surgical convalescence is over. Cardiac rhythms and EEG are normal. I saw the X-rays this morning and everything has sealed beautifully.“

Neill watched him quizzically. „You don't sound as if you approve.“

Morley laughed and stood up. „Of course I do.“ He walked down the aisle between the desks, white coat unbuttoned, hands sunk deep in his pockets. „No, so far you've vindicated yourself on every point. The party's only just beginning, but the guests are in damn good shape. No doubt about it. I thought three weeks was a little early to bring them out of hypnosis, but you'll probably be right there as well. Tonight is the first one they take on their own. Let's see how they are tomorrow morning.“

„What are you secretly expecting?“ Neill asked wryly. „Massive feedback from the medulla?“

„No,“ Morley said. „There again the psychometric tests have shown absolutely nothing coming up at all. Not a single trauma.“ He stared at the blackboard and then looked round at Neill. „Yes, as a cautious estimate I'd say you've succeeded.“

Neill leaned forward on his elbows. He flexed his jaw muscles. „I think I've more than succeeded. Blocking the medullary synapses has eliminated a lot of material I thought would still be there—the minor quirks and complexes, the petty aggressive phobias, the bad change in the psychic bank. Most of them have gone, or at least they don't show in the tests. However, they're the side targets, and thanks to you, John, and to everyone else in the team, we've hit a bull's eye on the main one.“

Morley murmured something, but Neill ran on in his clipped voice. „None of you realize it yet, but this is as big an advance as the step the first ichthyoid took out of the protozoic sea 300 million years ago. At last we've freed the mind, raised it out of that archaic sump called sleep, its nightly retreat into the medulla. With virtually one cut of the scalpel we've added twenty years to those men's lives.“

„I only hope they know what to do with them,“ Morley commented.

„Come, John,“ Neill snapped back. „That's not an argument. What they do with the time is their responsibility anyway. They'll make the most of it, just as we've always made the most, eventually, of any opportunity given us. It's too early to

think about it yet, but visualize the universal application of our technique. For the first time Man will be living a full twenty-four hour day, not spending a third of it as an invalid, snoring his way through an eighthour peepshow of infantile erotica.“

Tired, Neill broke off and rubbed his eyes. „What’s worrying you?“

Morley made a small, helpless gesture with one hand. „I’m not sure, it’s just that I...“ He played with the plastic brain mounted on a stand next to the blackboard. Reflected in one of the frontal whorls was a distorted image of Neill, with a twisted chinless face and vast domed cranium. Sitting alone among the desks in the empty lecture room he looked like an insane genius patiently waiting to take an examination no one could set him.

Morley turned the model with his finger, watched the image blur and dissolve. Whatever his doubts, Neill was probably the last person to understand them.

„I know all you’ve done is close off a few of the loops in the hypothalamus, and I realize the results are going to be spectacular. You’ll probably precipitate the greatest social and economic revolution since the Fall. But for some reason I can’t get that story of Chekov’s out of my mind—the one about the man who accepts a million-rouble bet that he can’t shut himself up alone for ten years. He tries to, nothing goes wrong, but one minute before the time is up he deliberately steps out of his room. Of course, he’s insane.“

„So?“

„I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about it all week.“

Neill let out a light snort. „I suppose you’re trying to say that sleep is some sort of communal activity and that these three men are now isolated, exiled from the group unconscious, the dark oceanic dream. Is that it?“

„Maybe.“

„Nonsense, John. The further we hold back the unconscious the better. We’re reclaiming some of the marshland. Physiologically sleep is nothing more than an inconvenient symptom of cerebral anoxaemia. It’s not that you’re afraid of missing, it’s the dream. You want to hold onto your front-row seat at the peepshow.“

„No,“ Morley said mildly. Sometimes Neill’s aggressiveness surprised him; it was almost as if he regarded sleep itself as secretly discreditable, a concealed vice. „What I really mean is that for better or worse Lang, Gorrell and Avery are now stuck with themselves. They’re never going to be able to get away, not even for a couple of minutes, let alone eight hours. How much of yourself can you stand? Maybe you need eight hours off a day just to get over the shock of being yourself. Remember, you and I aren’t always going to be around, feeding them with tests and films. What will happen if they get fed up with themselves?“

„They won’t,“ Neill said. He stood up, suddenly bored by Morley’s questions. „The total tempo of their lives will be lower than ours, these stresses and tensions won’t begin to crystallize. We’ll soon seem like a lot of manic-depressives to them, running round like dervishes half the day, then collapsing into a stupor the other half.“

He moved towards the door and reached out to the light switch. „Well, I’ll see you at six o’clock.“

They left the lecture room and started down the corridor together.

„What are you doing now?“ Morley asked.

Neill laughed. „What do you think?“ he said. „I’m going to get a good night’s sleep.“

A little after midnight Avery and Gorrell were playing table-tennis in the floodlit gymnasium. They were competent players, and passed the ball backwards and forwards with a minimum of effort. Both felt strong and alert; Avery was sweating slightly, but this was due to the arc-lights blazing down from the roof—maintaining, for safety’s sake, an illusion of continuous day—rather than to any excessive exertion of his own. The oldest of the three volunteers, a tall and somewhat detached figure, with a lean, closed face, he made no attempt to talk to Gorrell and concentrated on adjusting himself to the period ahead. He knew he would find no trace of fatigue, but as he played he carefully checked his respiratory rhythms and muscle tonus, and kept one eye on the clock.

Gorrell, a jaunty, self-composed man, was also subdued. Between strokes he glanced cautiously round the gymnasium, noting the hangarlike walls, the broad, polished floor, the shuttered skylights in the roof. Now and then, without realizing it, he fingered the circular trepan scar at the back of his head.

Out in the centre of the gymnasium a couple of armchairs and a sofa had been drawn up round a gramophone, and here Lang was playing chess with Morley, doing his section of night duty. Lang hunched forward over the chessboard. Wiry-haired and aggressive, with a sharp nose and mouth, he watched the pieces closely. He had played regularly against Morley since he arrived at the Clinic four months earlier, and the two were almost equally matched, with perhaps a slight edge to Morley. But tonight Lang had opened with a new attack and after ten moves had completed his development and begun to split Morley’s defence. His mind felt clear and precise, focused sharply on the game in front of him, though only that morning had he finally left the cloudy limbo of post-hypnosis through which he and the two others had drifted for three weeks like lobotomized phantoms.

Behind him, along one wall of the gymnasium, were the offices housing the control unit. Over his shoulder he saw a face peering at him through the circular observation window in one of the doors. Here, at constant alert, a group of orderlies and interns sat around waiting by their emergency trollies. (The end door, into a small ward containing three cots, was kept carefully locked.) After a few moments the face withdrew. Lang smiled at the elaborate machinery watching over him. His transference on to Neill had been positive and he had absolute faith in the success of the experiment. Neill had assured him that, at worst, the sudden accumulation of metabolites in his bloodstream might induce a mild torpor, but his brain would be unimpaired.

„Nerve fibre, Robert,“ Neill had told him time and again, „never fatigues. The brain cannot tire.“

While he waited for Morley to move he checked the time from the clock mounted against the wall. Twelve twenty. Morley yawned, his face drawn under the grey skin. He looked tired and drab. He slumped down into the armchair, face in one hand. Lang reflected how frail and primitive those who slept would soon seem, their minds sinking off each evening under the load of accumulating toxins, the edge of their awareness worn and frayed. Suddenly he realized that at that very moment Neill himself was asleep. A curiously disconcerting vision of Neill, huddled

in a rumpled bed two floors above, his blood-sugar low, and his mind drifting, rose before him.

Lang laughed at his own conceit, and Morley retrieved the rook he had just moved.

„I must be going blind. What am I doing?“

„No,“ Lang said. He started to laugh again. „I’ve just discovered I’m awake.“

Morley smiled. „We’ll have to put that down as one of the sayings of the week.“ He replaced the rook, sat up and looked across at the table-tennis pair. Gorrell had hit a fast backhand low over the net and Avery was running after the ball.

„They seem to be okay. How about you?“

„Right on top of myself,“ Lang said. His eyes flicked up and down the board and he moved before Morley caught his breath back.

Usually they went right through into the end-game, but tonight Morley had to concede on the twentieth move.

„Good,“ he said encouragingly. „You’ll be able to take on Neill soon. Like another?“

„No. Actually the game bores me. I can see that’s going to be a problem.“

„You’ll face it. Give yourself time to find your legs.“

Lang pulled one of the Bach albums out of its rack in the record cabinet. He put a Brandenburg Concerto on the turntable and lowered the sapphire. As the rich, contrapuntal patterns chimed out he sat back, listening intently to the music.

Morley thought: Absurd. How fast can you run? Three weeks ago you were strictly a hep-cat.

The next few hours passed rapidly.

At one thirty they went up to the Surgery, where Morley and one of the interns gave them a quick physical, checking their renal clearances, heart rate and reflexes.

Dressed again, they went into the empty cafeteria for a snack and sat on the stools, arguing what to call this new fifth meal. Avery suggested „Midfood“, Morley „Munch“.

At two they took their places in the Neurology theatre, and spent a couple of hours watching films of the hypnodrills of the past three weeks.

When the programme ended they started down for the gymnasium, the night almost over. They were still relaxed and cheerful; Gorrell led the way, playfully teasing Lang over some of the episodes in the films, mimicking his trancelike walk.

„Eyes shut, mouth open,“ he demonstrated, swerving into Lang, who jumped nimbly out of his way. „Look at you; you’re doing it even now. Believe me, Lang, you’re not awake, you’re somnambulating.“ He called back to Morley, „Agreed, Doctor?“

Morley swallowed a yawn. „Well, if he is, that makes two of us.“ He followed them along the corridor, doing his best to stay awake, feeling as if he, and not the three men in front of him, had been without sleep for the last three weeks.

Though the Clinic was quiet, at Neill’s orders all lights along the corridors and down the stairway had been left on. Ahead of them two orderlies checked that windows they passed were safely screened and doors were shut. Nowhere was there a single darkened alcove or shadow-trap.

Neill had insisted on this, reluctantly acknowledging a possible reflex association between darkness and sleep: „Let’s admit it. In all but a few organisms the association is strong enough to be a reflex. The higher mammals depend for their survival on a highly acute sensory apparatus, combined with a varying ability to store and classify information. Plunge them into darkness, cut off the flow of visual data to the cortex, and they’re paralysed. Sleep is a defence reflex. It lowers the metabolic rate, conserves energy, increases the organism’s survival-potential by merging it into its habitat.“

On the landing halfway down the staircase was a wide, shuttered window that by day opened out on to the parkscape behind the Clinic. As he passed it Gorrell stopped. He went over, released the blind, then unlatched the shutter.

Still holding it closed, he turned to Morley, watching from the flight above.

„Taboo, Doctor?“ he asked.

Morley looked at each of the three men in turn. Gorrell was calm and unperturbed, apparently satisfying nothing more sinister than an idle whim. Lang sat on the rail, watching curiously with an expression of clinical disinterest. Only Avery seemed slightly anxious, his thin face wan and pinched. Morley had an irrelevant thought: four a. m. shadow—they’ll need to shave twice a day. Then: why isn’t Neill here? He knew they’d make for a window as soon as they got the chance.

He noticed Lang giving him an amused smile and shrugged, trying to disguise his uneasiness.

„Go ahead, if you want to. As Neill said, the wires are cut.“

Gorrell threw back the shutter, and they clustered round the window and stared out into the night. Below, pewter-grey lawns stretched towards the pines and low hills in the distance. A couple of miles away on their left a neon sign winked and beckoned.

Neither Gorrell nor Lang noticed any reaction, and their interest began to flag within a few moments. Avery felt a sudden lift under the heart, then controlled himself. His eyes began to sift the darkness; the sky was clear and cloudless, and through the stars he picked out the narrow, milky traverse of the galactic rim. He watched it silently, letting the wind cool the sweat on his face and neck.

Morley stepped over to the window and leaned his elbows on the sill next to Avery. Out of the corner of his eye he carefully waited for any motor tremor—a fluttering eyelid, accelerated breathing that would signal a reflex discharging. He remembered Neill’s warning: „In Man sleep is largely volitional, and the reflex is conditioned by habit. But just because we’ve cut out the hypothalamic loops regulating the flow of consciousness doesn’t mean the reflex won’t discharge down some other pathway. However, sooner or later we’ll have to take the risk and give them a glimpse of the dark side of the sun.“ Morley was musing on this when something nudged his shoulder.

„Doctor,“ he heard Lang say. „Doctor Morley.“

He pulled himself together with a start. He was alone at the window. Gorrell and Avery were halfway down the next flight of stairs.

„What’s up?“ Morley asked quickly.

„Nothing,“ Lang assured him. „We’re just going back to the gym.“ He looked closely at Morley. „Are you all right?“

Morley rubbed his face. „God, I must have been asleep.“ He glanced at his watch. Four twenty. They had been at the window for over fifteen minutes. All he could remember was leaning on the sill. „And I was worried about you.“

Everybody was amused, Gorrell particularly. „Doctor,“ he drawled, „if you're interested I can recommend you to a good narcotomist.“

After five o'clock they felt a gradual ebb of tonus from their arm and leg muscles. Renal clearances were falling and breakdown products were slowly clogging their tissues. Their palms felt damp and numb, the soles of their feet like pads of sponge rubber. The sensation was vaguely unsettling, allied to no feelings of mental fatigue.

The numbness spread. Avery noticed it stretching the skin over his cheekbones, pulling at his temples and giving him a slight frontal migraine. He doggedly turned the pages of a magazine, his hands like lumps of putty.

Then Neill came down, and they began to revive. Neill looked fresh and spruce, bouncing on the tips of his toes.

„How's the night shift going?“ he asked briskly, walking round each one of them in turn, smiling as he sized them up. „Feel all right?“

„Not too bad, Doctor,“ Gorrell told him. „A slight case of insomnia.“

Neill roared, slapped him on the shoulder and led the way up to the Surgery laboratory.

At nine, shaved and in fresh clothes, they assembled in the lecture room. They felt cool and alert again. The peripheral numbness and slight head torpor had gone as soon as the detoxication drips had been plugged in, and Neill told them that within a week their kidneys would have enlarged sufficiently to cope on their own.

All morning and most of the afternoon they worked on a series of IQ, associative and performance tests. Neill kept them hard at it, steering swerving blips of light around a cathode screen, juggling with intricate numerical and geometric sequences, elaborating word-chains.

He seemed more than satisfied with the results.

„Shorter access times, deeper memory traces,“ he pointed out to Morley when the three men had gone off at five for the rest period. „Barrels of prime psychic marrow.“ He gestured at the test cards spread out across the desk in his office. „And you were worried about the Unconscious. Look at those Rorschachs of Lang's. Believe me, John, I'll soon have him reminiscing about his foetal experiences.“

Morley nodded, his first doubts fading.

Over the next two weeks either he or Neill was with the men continuously, sitting out under the floodlights in the centre of the gymnasium, assessing their assimilation of the eight extra hours, carefully watching for any symptoms of withdrawal. Neill carried everyone along, from one programme phase to the next, through the test periods, across the long hours of the interminable nights, his powerful ego injecting enthusiasm into every member of the unit.

Privately, Morley worried about the increasing emotional overlay apparent in the relationship between Neill and the three men. He was afraid they were becoming conditioned to identify Neill with the experiment. (Ring the meal bell and the subject salivates; but suddenly stop ringing the bell after a long period of

conditioning and it temporarily loses the ability to feed itself. The hiatus barely harms a dog, but it might trigger disaster in an already oversensitized psyche.)

Neill was fully alert to this. At the end of the first two weeks, when he caught a bad head cold after sitting up all night and decided to spend the next day in bed, he called Morley into his office.

„The transference is getting much too positive. It needs to be eased off a little.“

„I agree,“ Morley said. „But how?“

„Tell them I’ll be asleep for forty-eight hours,“ Neill said. He picked up a stack of reports, plates and test cards and bundled them under one arm. „I’ve deliberately overdosed myself with sedative to get some rest. I’m worn to a shadow, full fatigue syndrome, load-cells screaming. Lay it on.“

„Couldn’t that be rather drastic?“ Morley asked. „They’ll hate you for it.“

But Neill only smiled and went off to requisition an office near his bedroom.

That night Morley was on duty in the gymnasium from ten p. m. to six a. m. As usual he first checked that the orderlies were ready with their emergency trollies, read through the log left by the previous supervisor, one of the senior interns, and then went over to the circle of chairs. He sat back on the sofa next to Lang and leafed through a magazine, watching the three men carefully. In the glare of the arclights their lean faces had a sallow, cyanosed look. The senior intern had warned him that Avery and Gorrell might overtire themselves at table-tennis, but by eleven p. m. they stopped playing and settled down in the armchairs. They read desultorily and made two trips up to the cafeteria, escorted each time by one of the orderlies. Morley told them about Neill, but surprisingly none of them made any comment.

Midnight came slowly. Avery read, his long body hunched up in an armchair. Gorrell played chess against himself.

Morley dozed.

Lang felt restless. The gymnasium’s silence and absence of movement oppressed him. He switched on the gramophone and played through a Brandenburg, analysing its theme-trains. Then he ran a word-association test on himself, turning the pages of a book and using the top right-hand corner words as the control list.

Morley leaned over. „Anything come up?“ he asked.

„A few interesting responses.“ Lang found a note-pad and jotted something down. „I’ll show them to Neill in the morning—or whenever he wakes up.“ He gazed up pensively at the arc-lights. „I was just speculating. What do you think the next step forward will be?“

„Forward where?“ Morley asked.

Lang gestured expansively. „I mean up the evolutionary slope. Three hundred million years ago we became air-breathers and left the seas behind. Now we’ve taken the next logical step forward and eliminated sleep. What’s next?“

Morley shook his head. „The two steps aren’t analogous. Anyway, in point of fact you haven’t left the primeval sea behind. You’re still carrying a private replica of it around as your bloodstream. All you did was encapsulate a necessary piece of the physical environment in order to escape it.“

Lang nodded. „I was thinking of something else. Tell me, has it ever occurred to you how completely death-orientated the psyche is?“

Morley smiled. „Now and then,“ he said, wondering where this led.

„It’s curious,“ Lang went on reflectively. „The pleasure-pain principle, the whole survival-compulsion apparatus of sex, the Super-Ego’s obsession with tomorrow—most of the time the psyche can’t see farther than its own tombstone. Now why has it got this strange fixation? For one very obvious reason.“ He tapped the air with his forefinger. „Because every night it’s given a pretty convincing reminder of the fate in store for it.“

„You mean the black hole,“ Morley suggested wryly. „Sleep?“

„Exactly. It’s simply a pseudo-death. Of course, you’re not aware of it, but it must be terrifying.“ He frowned. „I don’t think even Neill realizes that, far from being restful, sleep is a genuinely traumatic experience.“

So that’s it, Morley thought. The great father analyst has been caught napping on his own couch. He tried to decide which were worse—patients who knew a lot of psychiatry, or those who only knew a little.

„Eliminate sleep,“ Lang was saying, „and you also eliminate all the fear and defence mechanisms erected round it. Then, at last, the psyche has a chance to orientate towards something more valid.“

„Such as...?“ Morley asked.

„I don’t know. Perhaps... Self?“

„Interesting,“ Morley commented. It was three ten a. m. He decided to spend the next hour going through Lang’s latest test cards.

He waited a discretionary five minutes, then stood up and walked over to the surgery office.

Lang hooked an arm across the back of the sofa and watched the orderly room door.

„What’s Morley playing at?“ he asked. „Have either of you seen him anywhere?“

Avery lowered his magazine. „Didn’t he go off into the orderly room?“

„Ten minutes ago,“ Lang said. „He hasn’t looked in since. There’s supposed to be someone on duty with us continuously. Where is he?“

Gorrell, playing solitaire chess, looked up from his board. „Perhaps these late nights are getting him down. You’d better wake him before Neill finds out. He’s probably fallen asleep over a batch of your test cards.“

Lang laughed and settled down on the sofa. Gorrell reached out to the gramophone, took a record out of the rack and slid it on to the turntable.

As the gramophone began to hum Lang noticed how silent and deserted the gymnasium seemed. The Clinic was always quiet, but even at night a residual ebb and flow of sound—a chair dragging in the orderly room, a generator charging under one of the theatres—edded through and kept it alive.

Now the air was flat and motionless. Lang listened carefully. The whole place had the dead, echoless feel of an abandoned building.

He stood up and strolled over to the orderly room. He knew Neill discouraged casual conversation with the control crew, but Morley’s absence puzzled him.

He reached the door and peered through the window to see if Morley was inside.

The room was empty.

The light was on. Two emergency trollies stood in their usual place against the wall near the door, a third was in the middle of the floor, a pack of playing cards strewn across its deck, but the group of three or four interns had gone.

Lang hesitated, reached down to open the door, and found it had been locked.

He tried the handle again, then called out over his shoulder: „Avery. There's nobody in here.“

„Try next door. They're probably being briefed for tomorrow.“

Lang stepped over to the surgery office. The light was off but he could see the white enamelled desk and the big programme charts round the wall. There was no one inside.

Avery and Gorrell were watching him.

„Are they in there?“ Avery asked.

„No.“ Lang turned the handle. „The door's locked.“

Gorrell switched off the gramophone and he and Avery came over. They tried the two doors again.

„They're here somewhere,“ Avery said. „There must be at least one person on duty.“ He pointed to the end door. „What about that one?“

„Locked,“ Lang said. „69 always has been. I think it leads down to the basement.“

„Let's try Neill's office,“ Gorrell suggested. „If they aren't in there we'll stroll through to Reception and try to leave. This must be some trick of Neill's.“

There was no window in the door to Neill's office. Gorrell knocked, waited, knocked again more loudly.

Lang tried the handle, then knelt down. „The light's off,“ he reported.

Avery turned and looked round at the two remaining doors out of the gymnasium, both in the far wall, one leading up to the cafeteria and the Neurology wing, the other into the car park at the rear of the Clinic.

„Didn't Neill hint that he might try something like this on us?“ he asked. „To see whether we can go through a night on our own.“

„But Neill's asleep,“ Lang objected. „He'll be in bed for a couple of days. Unless...“

Gorrell jerked his head in the direction of the chairs. „Come on. He and Morley are probably watching us now.“

They went back to their seats.

Gorrell dragged the chess stool over to the sofa and set up the pieces. Avery and Lang stretched out in armchairs and opened magazines, turning the pages deliberately. Above them the banks of arc-lights threw their wide cones of light down into the silence.

The only noise was the slow left-right, left-right motion of the clock.

Three fifteen a. m.

The shift was imperceptible. At first a slight change of perspective, a fading and regrouping of outlines. Somewhere a focus slipped, a shadow swung slowly across a wall, its angles breaking and lengthening. The motion was fluid, a procession of infinitesimals, but gradually its total direction emerged.

The gymnasium was shrinking. Inch by inch, the walls were moving inwards, encroaching across the periphery of the floor. As they shrank towards each other their features altered: the rows of skylights below the ceiling blurred and faded, the power cable running along the base of the wall merged into the skirting board, the square baffles of the air vents vanished into the grey distemper.

Above, like the undersurface of an enormous lift, the ceiling sank towards the floor.

Gorrell leaned his elbows on the chessboard, face sunk in his hands. He had locked himself in a perpetual check, but he continued to shuttle the pieces in and out of one of the corner squares, now and then gazing into the air for inspiration, while his eyes roved up and down the walls around him.

Somewhere, he knew, Neill was watching him.

He moved, looked up and followed the wall opposite him down to the far corner, alert for the telltale signs of a retractable panel. For some while he had been trying to discover Neill's spy-hole, but without any success. The walls were blank and featureless; he had twice covered every square foot of the two facing him, and apart from the three doors there appeared to be no fault or aperture of even the most minute size anywhere on their surface.

After a while his left eye began to throb painfully, and he pushed away the chessboard and lay back. Above him a line of fluorescent tubes hung down from the ceiling, mounted in checkered plastic brackets that diffused the light. He was about to comment on his search for the spy-hole to Avery and Lang when he realized that any one of them could conceal a microphone.

He decided to stretch his legs, stood up and sauntered off across the floor. After sitting over the chessboard for half an hour he felt cramped and restless, and would have enjoyed tossing a ball up and down, or flexing his muscles on a rowing machine. But annoyingly no recreational facilities, apart from the three armchairs and the gramophone, had been provided.

He reached the end wall and wandered round, listening for any sound from the adjacent rooms. He was beginning to resent Neill spying on him and the entire keyhole conspiracy, and he noted with relief that it was a quarter past three: in under three hours it would all be over.

The gymnasium closed in. Now less than half its original size, its walls bare and windowless, it was a vast, shrinking box. The sides slid into each other, merging along an abstract hairline, like planes severing in a multi-dimensional flux. Only the clock and a single door remained.

Lang had discovered where the microphone was hidden.

He sat forward in his chair, cracking his knuckles until Gorrell returned, then rose and offered him his seat. Avery was in the other armchair, feet up on the gramophone.

„Sit down for a bit,“ Lang said. „I feel like a stroll.“

Gorrell lowered himself into the chair. „I'll ask Neill if we can have a ping-pong table in here. It should help pass the time and give us some exercise.“

„A good idea,“ Lang agreed. „If we can get the table through the door. I doubt if there's enough room in here, even if we moved the chairs right up against the wall.“

He walked off across the floor, surreptitiously peering through the orderly room window. The light was on, but there was still no one inside.

He ambled over to the gramophone and paced up and down near it for a few moments. Suddenly he swung round and caught his foot under the flex leading to the wall socket.

The plug fell out on to the floor. Lang left it where it lay, went over and sat down on the arm of Gorrell's chair.

„I've just disconnected the microphone,“ he confided.

Gorrell looked round carefully. „Where was it?“

Lang pointed. „Inside the gramophone.“ He laughed softly. „I thought I'd pull Neill's leg. He'll be wild when he realizes he can't hear us.“

„Why do you think it was in the gramophone?“ Gorrell asked.

„What better place? Besides, it couldn't be anywhere else. Apart from in there.“ He gestured at the light bowl suspended from the centre of the ceiling. „It's empty except for the two bulbs. The gramophone is the obvious place. I had a feeling it was there, but I wasn't sure until I noticed we had a gramophone, but no records.“

Gorrell nodded sagely.

Lang moved away, chuckling to himself.

Above the door of Room 69 the clock ticked on at three fifteen.

The motion was accelerating. What had once been the gymnasium was now a small room, seven feet wide, a tight, almost perfect cube. The walls plunged inwards, along colliding diagonals, only a few feet from their final focus...

Avery noticed Gorrell and Lang pacing around his chair. „Either of you want to sit down yet?“ he asked.

They shook their heads. Avery rested for a few minutes and then climbed out of the chair and stretched himself.

„Quarter past three,“ he remarked, pressing his hands against the ceiling. „This is getting to be a long night.“

He leaned back to let Gorrell pass him, and then started to follow the others round the narrow space between the armchair and the walls.

„I don't know how Neill expects us to stay awake in this hole for twenty-four hours a day,“ he went on. „Why haven't we got a television set in here? Even a radio would be something.“

They sidled round the chair together, Gorrell, followed by Avery, with Lang completing the circle, their shoulders beginning to hunch, their heads down as they watched the floor, their feet falling into the slow, leaden rhythm of the clock.

This, then, was the manhole: a narrow, vertical cubicle, a few feet wide, six deep. Above, a solitary, dusty bulb gleamed down from a steel grille. As if crumbling under the impetus of their own momentum, the surface of the walls had coarsened, the texture was that of stone, streaked and pitted...

Gorrell bent down to loosen one of his shoelaces and Avery bumped into him sharply, knocking his shoulder against the wall.

„All right?“ he asked, taking Gorrell's arm. „This place is a little overcrowded. I can't understand why Neill ever put us in here.“

He leaned against the wall, head bowed to prevent it from touching the ceiling, and gazed about thoughtfully.

Lang stood squeezed into the corner next to him, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

Gorrell squatted down on his heels below them.

„What's the time?“ he asked.

„I'd say about three fifteen,“ Lang offered. „More or less.“

„Lang,“ Avery asked, „where's the ventilator here?“

Lang peered up and down the walls and across the small square of ceiling. „There must be one somewhere.“ Gorrell stood up and they shuffled about, examining the floor between their feet.

„There may be a vent in the light grille,“ Gorrell suggested. He reached up and slipped his fingers through the cage, running them behind the bulb.

„Nothing there. Odd. I should have thought we'd use the air in here within half an hour.“

„Easily,“ Avery said. „You know, there's something—“

Just then Lang broke in. He gripped Avery's elbow.

„Avery,“ he asked. „Tell me. How did we get here?“

„What do you mean, get here? We're on Neill's team.“

Lang cut him off. „I know that.“ He pointed at the floor. „I mean, in here.“

Gorrell shook his head. „Lang, relax. How do you think? Through the door.“

Lang looked squarely at Gorrell, then at Avery.

„What door?“ he asked calmly.

Gorrell and Avery hesitated, then swung round to look at each wall in turn, scanning it from floor to ceiling. Avery ran his hands over the heavy masonry, then knelt down and felt the floor, digging his fingers at the rough stone slabs. Gorrell crouched beside him, scrabbling at the thin seams of dirt.

Lang backed out of their way into a corner, and watched them impassively. His face was calm and motionless, but in his left temple a single vein fluttered insanely.

When they finally stood up, staring at each other unsteadily, he flung himself between them at the opposite wall.

„Neill! Neill!“ he shouted. He pounded angrily on the wall with his fists. „Neill! Neill!“

Above him the light began to fade.

* * * * *

Morley closed the door of the surgery office behind him and went over to the desk. Though it was three fifteen a. m., Neill was probably awake, working on the latest material in the office next to his bedroom. Fortunately that afternoon's test cards, freshly marked by one of the interns, had only just reached his in-tray.

Morley picked out Lang's folder and started to sort through the cards. He suspected that Lang's responses to some of the key words and suggestion triggers lying disguised in the question forms might throw illuminating sidelights on to the real motives behind his equation of sleep and death.

The communicating door to the orderly room opened and an intern looked in.

„Do you want me to take over in the gym, Doctor?“

Morley waved him away. „Don't bother. I'm going back in a moment.“

He selected the cards he wanted and began to initial his withdrawals. Glad to get away from the glare of the arclights, he delayed his return as long as he could, and it was three twenty-five a. m. when he finally left the office and stepped back into the gymnasium.

The men were sitting where he had left them. Lang watched him approach, head propped comfortably on a cushion. Avery was slouched down in his armchair,

nose in a magazine, while Gorrell hunched over the chessboard, hidden behind the sofa.

„Anybody feel like coffee?“ Morley called out, deciding they needed some exercise.

None of them looked up or answered. Morley felt a flicker of annoyance, particularly at Lang, who was staring past him at the clock.

Then he saw something that made him stop.

Lying on the polished floor ten feet from the sofa was a chess piece. He went over and picked it up. The piece was the black king. He wondered how Gorrell could be playing chess with one of the two essential pieces of the game missing when he noticed three more pieces lying on the floor near by.

His eyes moved to where Gorrell was sitting.

Scattered over the floor below the chair and sofa was the rest of the set. Gorrell was slumped over the stool. One of his elbows had slipped and the arm dangled between his knees, knuckles resting on the floor. The other hand supported his face. Dead eyes peered down at his feet.

Morley ran over to him, shouting: „Lang! Avery! Get the orderlies!“

He reached Gorrell and pulled him back off the stool.

„Lang!“ he called again.

Lang was still staring at the clock, his body in the stiff, unreal posture of a waxworks dummy.

Morley let Gorrell loll back on to the sofa, leaned over and glanced at Lang's face.

He crossed to Avery, stretched out behind the magazine, and jerked his shoulder. Avery's head bobbed stiffly. The magazine slipped and fell from his hands, leaving his fingers curled in front of his face.

Morley stepped over Avery's legs to the gramophone. He switched it on, gripped the volume control and swung it round to full amplitude.

Above the orderly room door an alarm bell shrilled out through the silence.

* * * * *

„Weren't you with them?“ Neill asked sharply.

„No,“ Morley admitted. They were standing by the door of the emergency ward. Two orderlies had just dismantled the electro-therapy unit and were wheeling the console away on a trolley. Outside in the gymnasium a quiet, urgent traffic of nurses and interns moved past. All but a single bank of arc-lights had been switched off, and the gymnasium seemed like a deserted stage at the end of a performance.

„I slipped into the office to pick up a few test cards,“ he explained. „I wasn't gone more than ten minutes.“

„You were supposed to watch them continuously,“ Neill snapped. „Not wander off by yourself whenever you felt like it. What do you think we had the gym and this entire circus set up for?“

It was a little after five thirty a. m. After working hopelessly on the three men for a couple of hours, he was close to exhaustion. He looked down at them, lying inertly in their cots, canvas sheets buckled up to their chins. They had barely changed, but their eyes were open and unblinking, and their faces had the empty, reflexless look of psychic zero.

An intern bent over Lang, thumbing a hypodermic. Morley stared at the floor. „I think they would have gone anyway.“

„How can you say that?“ Neill clamped his lips together. He felt frustrated and impotent. He knew Morley was probably right—the three men were in terminal withdrawal, unresponsive to either insulin or electrotherapy, and a vice-tight catatonic seizure didn't close in out of nowhere—but as always refused to admit anything without absolute proof.

He led the way into his office and shut the door.

„Sit down.“ He pulled a chair out for Morley and prowled off round the room, slamming a fist into his palm.

„All right, John. What is it?“

Morley picked up one of the test cards lying on the desk, balanced it on a corner and spun it between his fingers. Phrases swam through his mind, tentative and uncertain, like blind fish.

„What do you want me to say?“ he asked. „Reactivation of the infantile imago? A regression into the great, slumbering womb? Or to put it more simply still—just a fit of pique?“

„Go on.“

Morley shrugged. „Continual consciousness is more than the brain can stand. Any signal repeated often enough eventually loses its meaning. Try saying the word *sleep* fifty times. After a point the brain's selfawareness dulls. It's no longer able to grasp who or why it is, and it rides adrift.“

„What do we do then?“

„Nothing. Short of re-scoring all the way down to Lumbar 1. The central nervous system can't stand narcotomy.“

Neill shook his head. „You're lost,“ he said curtly. „Juggling with generalities isn't going to bring those men back. First, we've got to find out what happened to them, what they actually felt and saw.“

Morley frowned dubiously. „That jungle is marked *private*. Even if you do, is a psychotic's withdrawal drama going to make any sense?“

„Of course it will. However insane it seems to us, it was real enough to them. If we know the ceiling fell in or the whole gym filled with ice-cream or turned into a maze, we've got something to work on.“ He sat down on the desk. „Do you remember that story of Chekov's you told me about?“

„*The Bet*? Yes.“

„I read it last night. Curious. It's a lot nearer what you're really trying to say than you know.“ He gazed round the office. „This room in which the man is penned for ten years symbolizes the mind driven to the furthest limits of selfawareness... Something very similar happened to Avery, Gorrell and Lang. They must have reached a stage beyond which they could no longer contain the idea of their own identity. But far from being unable to grasp the idea, I'd say that they were conscious of nothing else. Like the man in the spherical mirror, who can only see a single gigantic eye staring back at him.“

„So you think their withdrawal is a straightforward escape from the eye, the overwhelming ego?“

„Not escape,“ Neill corrected. „The psychotic never escapes from anything. He's much more sensible. He merely readjusts reality to suit himself. Quite a trick to

learn, too. The room in Chekov's story gives me an idea as to how they might have re-adjusted. Their particular equivalent of this room was the gym. I'm beginning to realize it was a mistake to put them in there—all those lights blazing down, the huge floor, high walls. They merely exaggerate the sensation of overload. In fact the gym might easily have become an external projection of their own egos."

Neill drummed his fingers on the desk. "My guess is that at this moment they're either striding around in there the size of hundred-foot giants, or else they've cut it down to their own dimensions. More probably that. They've just pulled the gym in on themselves."

Morley grinned bleakly. "So all we've got to do now is pump them full of honey and apomorphine and coax them out. Suppose they refuse?"

"They won't," Neill said. "You'll see."

There was a rap on the door. An intern stuck his head through.

"Lang's coming out of it, Doctor. He's calling for you."

Neill bounded out.

Morley followed him into the ward.

Lang was lying in his cot, body motionless under the canvas sheet. His lips were parted slightly. No sound came from them but Morley, bending over next to Neill, could see his hyoid bone vibrating in spasms.

"He's very faint," the intern warned.

Neill pulled up a chair and sat down next to the cot. He made a visible effort of concentration, flexing his shoulders. He bent his head close to Lang's and listened.

Five minutes later it came through again.

Lang's lips quivered. His body arched under the sheet, straining at the buckles, and then subsided.

"Neill... Neill," he whispered. The sounds, thin and strangled, seemed to be coming from the bottom of a well. "Neill... Neill... Neill..."

Neill stroked his forehead with a small, neat hand.

"Yes, Bobby," he said gently. His voice was feather-soft, caressing. "I'm here, Bobby. You can come out now."

