# Lest We Remember

Isaac Asimov

1

The problem with John Heath, as far as John Heath was concerned, was that he struck a dead average. He was sure of it. What was worse, he felt that Susan suspected it.

It meant he would never make a true mark in the world, never climb to the top of Quantum Pharmaceuticals, where he was a steady cog among the junior executives—never make the Quantum Leap.

Nor would he do it anywhere else, if he changed jobs.

He sighed inwardly. In just two more weeks he was going to be married and for her sake he yearned to be upwardly mobile. After all, he loved her madly and wanted to shine in her eyes.

But then, that was dead average for a young man about to be married.

Susan Collins looked at John lovingly. And why not? He was reasonably good-looking and intelligent and a steady, affectionate fellow besides. If he didn’t blind her with his brilliance, he at least didn’t upset her with an erraticism he didn’t possess.

She patted the pillow she had placed behind his head when he sat down in the armchair and handed him his drink, making sure he had a firm grip before she let go.

She said, “I’m practicing to treat you well, Johnny. I’ve got to be an efficient wife.”

John sipped at his drink. “I’m the one who’ll have to be on my toes, Sue. Your salary is higher than mine.”

“It’s all going to go into one pocket once we’re married. It will be the firm of Johnny and Sue keeping one set of books.”

“You’ll have to keep it,” said John despondently. “I’m bound to make mistakes if I try.”

“Only because you’re sure you will. When are your friends coming?”

“Nine, I think. Maybe nine-thirty. And they’re not exactly friends. They’re Quantum people from the research labs.”

“You’re sure they won’t expect to be fed?”

“They said after dinner. I’m positive about that. It’s business.”

She looked at him quizzically. “You didn’t say that before.”

“Say what before?”

“That it was business. Are you sure?”

John felt confused. Any effort to remember precisely always left him confused. “They said so—I think.”

Susan’s look was that of good-natured exasperation, rather like the one she would have given a friendly puppy who is completely unaware its paws are muddy. “If you really thought,” she said, ‘‘as often as you say ‘1 think’ you wouldn’t be so perennially uncertain. Don’t you see it can’t be business. If it were business, wouldn’t they see you at business?”

“It’s confidential,” said John. “They don’t want to see me at work. Not even at my apartment.”

“Why here, then?”

“Oh, I suggested that. I thought you ought to be around, anyway. They’re going to have to deal with the firm of Johnny and Sue, right?”

“It depends,” said Susan, “on what the confidential is all about. Did they give you any hints?”

“No, but it couldn’t hurt to listen. It could be something that would give me a boost in standing at the firm.”

“Why you?” asked Susan.

John looked hurt, “Why not me?”

“It just strikes me that someone at your job level doesn’t require all that confidentiality and that—”

She broke off when the intercom buzzed. She dashed off to answer and came back to say, “They’re on the way up.”

2

Two of them were at the door. One was Boris Kupfer, whom John had already spoken to—large and restless, with a clear view of bluish stubble on his chin.

The other was David Anderson, smaller and more composed. His quick eyes moved this way and that, however, missing nothing.

“Susan,” said John, uncertainly, still holding the door open. “These are the two colleagues of mine that I told you about. Boris—” He hit a blank in his memory banks and stopped.

“Boris Kupfer,” said the larger man morosely, jingling some change in his pocket, :’and David Anderson here. It’s very kind of you, Miss—”

“Susan Collins.”

“It’s very kind of you to make your place of residence available to Mr. Heath and to us for a private conference. We apologize for trespassing on your time and your privacy in this manner—and if you could leave us to ourselves for a while, we will be further grateful.”

Susan stared at him solemnly. “Do you want me to go to the movies, or just into the next room?”

“If you could visit a friend—”

“No,” said Susan, firmly.

“You can dispose of your time as you please, of course. A movie, if you wish.”

“When I said ‘No,’ “said Susan, “I meant I wasn’t leaving. I want to know what this is about.”

Kupfer seemed nonplussed. He stared at Anderson for a moment, then said, “It’s confidential, as Mr. Heath explained to you, I hope.”

John, looking uneasy, said, “I explained that. Susan understands—”

“Susan,” said Susan, “doesn’t understand and wasn’t given to understand that she was to absent herself from the proceedings. This is my apartment and Johnny and I are being married in two weeks—exactly two weeks from today. We are the firm of Johnny and Sue and you’ll have to deal with the firm.”

Anderson’s voice sounded for the first time, surprisingly” deep and as smooth as though it had been waxed. “Boris, the young woman is right. As Mr. Heath’s soon-to-be wife, she will have a great interest in what we have come here to suggest and it would be wrong to exclude her. She has so firm an interest in our proposal that if she were to wish to leave, I would urge her most strongly to remain.”

“Well, then, my friends,” said Susan, “what will you have to drink? Once I bring you those drinks, we can begin.”

Both were seated rather stiffly and had sipped cautiously at their drinks, and then Kupfer said, “Heath, I don’t suppose you know much about the chemical details of the company’s work—the cerebro-chemicals, for instance.”

“Not a bit,” said John, uneasily.

“No reason you should,” said Anderson, silkily.

“It’s like this,” said Kupfer, casting an uneasy glance at Susan—

“No reason to go into technical details,” said Anderson, almost at the lower level of audibility.

Kupfer colored slightly. “Without technical details, Quantum Pharmaceuticals deals with cerebro-chemicals which are, as the name implies, chemicals that affect the cerebrum, that is, the higher functioning of the brain.”

“It must be very complicated work,” said Susan, with composure.

“It is,” said Kupfer. “The mammalian brain has hundreds of characteristic molecular varieties found nowhere else, which serve to modulate cerebral activity, including aspects of what we might term the intellectual life. The work is under the closest corporate security, which is why Anderson wants no technical details. I can say this, though. We can go no further with animal experiments. We’re up against a brick wall if we can’t try the human response.”

“Then why don’t you?” said Susan. “What stops you?”

“Public reaction if something goes wrong!”

“Use volunteers, then.”

“That won’t help. Quantum Pharmaceuticals couldn’t take the adverse publicity if something went wrong.”

Susan looked at them mockingly. ” Are you two working on your own, then?”

Anderson raised his hand to stop Kupfer. “Young woman, ” he said, “let me explain briefly in order to put an end to wasteful verbal fencing. If we succeed, we will be enormously rewarded. If we fail, Quantum Pharmaceuticals will disown us and we will pay what penalty there is to be paid, such as the ending of our careers. If you ask us, why we are willing to take this risk, the answer is, we do not think a risk exists. We are reasonably sure we will succeed; entirely sure we will do no harm. The corporation feels it cannot take the chance; but we feel we can. Now, Kupfer, proceed!”

Kupfer said, “We have a memory chemical. It works with every animal we have tried. Their learning ability improves amazingly. It should work on human beings, too.”

John said, “That sounds exciting.”

“It is exciting,” said Kupfer. “Memory is not improved by devising a way for the brain to store information more efficiently. All our studies show that the brain stores almost unlimited numbers of items perfectly and permanently. The difficulty lies in recall. How many times have you had a name at the tip of your tongue and couldn’t get it? How many times have you failed to come up with something you knew you knew, and then did come up with it two hours later when you were thinking about something else. Am I putting it correctly, David?”

“You are,” said Anderson. “Recall is inhibited, we think, because the mammalian brain outraced its needs by developing a too-perfect recording system. A mammal stores more bits of information than it needs or is capable of using and if all of it was on tap at all times, it would never be able to choose among them quickly enough for appropriate reaction. Recall is inhibited, therefore, to insure that items emerge from memory storage in manipulable numbers, and with those items most desired not blurred by the accompaniment of numerous other items of no interest.

“There is a definite chemical in the brain that functions as a recall inhibitor, and we have a chemical that neutralizes the inhibitor. We call it a disinhibitor, and as far as we have been able to ascertain the matter, it has no deleterious side effects.”

Susan laughed. “I see what’s coming, Johnny. You can leave now, gentlemen. You just said that recall is inhibited to allow mammals to react more efficiently, and now you say that the disinhibitor has no deleterious side effects. Surely the disinhibitor will make the mammals react less efficiently; perhaps find themselves unable to react at all. And now you are going to propose that you try it on Johnny and see if you reduce him to catatonic immobility or not.”

Anderson rose, his thin lips quivering. He took a few rapid strides to the far end of the room and back. When he sat down, he was composed and smiling. “In the first place, Miss Collins, it’s a matter of dosage. We told you that the experimental animals all displayed enhanced learning ability. Naturally, we didn’t eliminate the inhibitor entirely; we merely suppressed it in part. Secondly, we have reason to think the human brain can handle complete disinhibition. It is much larger than the brain of any animal we have tested and we all know its incomparable capacity for abstract thought.

“It is a brain designed for perfect recall, but the blind forces of evolution have not managed to remove the inhibiting chemical which, after all, was designed for and inherited from the lower animals.”

“Are you sure?” asked John.

“You can’t be sure,” said Susan, flatly.

Kupfer said, “We are sure, but we need the proof to convince others. That’s why we have to try a human being.”

“John, in fact,” said Susan. “Yes.”

“Which brings us,” said Susan, “to the key question. Why John?”

“Well,” said Kupfer, slowly, “we need someone for whom chances of success are most nearly certain, and in whom it would be most demonstrable. We don’t want someone so low in mental capacity that we must use dangerously large doses of the disinhibitor; nor do we want someone so bright that the effect will not be sufficiently noticeable. We need someone who’s average. Fortunately, we have the full physical and psychological profiles of all the employees at Quantum and in this and, in fact, all other ways, Mr. Heath is ideal.”

“Dead average?” said Susan.

John looked stricken at the use of the phrase he had thought his own innermost, and disgraceful, secret. “Come on, now,” he said.

Ignoring John’s outcry, Kupfer answered Susan, “Yes.”

“And he won’t be, if he submits to treatment?”

Anderson’s lips stretched into another one of his cheerless smiles. “That’s right. He won’t be. This is something to think about if you’re going to be married soon—the firm of Johnny and Sue, I think you called it. As it is, I don’t think the firm will advance at Quantum, Miss Collins, for although Heath is a good and reliable employee he is, as you say, dead average. If he takes the disinhibitor, however, he will become a remarkable person and move upward with astonishing speed. Consider what that will mean to the firm.”

“What does the firm have to lose?” asked Susan, grimly.

Anderson said, “I don’t see how you can lose anything. It will be a sensible dose which can be administered at the laboratories tomorrow—Sunday. We will have the floor to ourselves; we will keep him under surveillance for a few hours. It is certain nothing could go wrong. If I could tell you of our painstaking experimentation and of our thoroughgoing exploration of all possible side effects—”

“On animals,” said Susan, not giving an inch.

But John said, tightly, “I’ll make the decision, Sue. I’ve had it up to here with that dead-average bit. It’s worth some risk to me if it means getting off that dead-average dead end.”

“Johnny,” said Susan, “don’t jump.”

“I’m thinking of the firm, Sue. I want to contribute my share.”

Anderson said, “Good, but sleep on it. We will leave two copies of an agreement we will ask you to look over and sign. Please don’t show it to anybody whether you sign or not. We will be here tomorrow morning again to take you to the laboratory.”

They smiled, rose, and left.

John read over the agreement with a troubled frown, then looked up. “You don’t think I should be doing this, do you, Sue?”

“It worries me, sure,”

“Look, if I have a chance to get away from that dead average—”

Susan said, “What’s wrong with that? I’ve met so many nuts and cranks in my short life that I welcome a nice, average guy like you, Johnny. Listen, I’m dead average too.”

“You dead average. With your looks? Your figure?”

Susan looked down upon herself with a touch of complacency. “Well, then, I’m just your dead-average gorgeous girl,” she said.

3

The injection took place at 8 A.M. Sunday, no more than twelve hours after the proposition had been advanced. A thoroughly computerized body sensor was attached to John in a dozen places, while Susan watched with keen-eyed apprehension.

Kupfer said, “Please, Heath, relax. All is going well, but tension speeds the heart rate, raises the blood pressure, and skews our results.”

“How can I relax?” muttered John.

Susan put in sharply, “Skews the results to the point where you don’t know what’s going on?”

“No, no,” said Anderson. “Boris said all is going well and it is. It is just that our animals were always sedated before the injection, and we did not feel sedation would have been appropriate in this case. So if we can’t have sedation, we must expect tension. Just breathe slowly and do your best to minimize it.”

It was late afternoon before he was finally disconnected. “How do you feel?” asked Anderson.

“Nervous,” said John. “Otherwise, all right.”

“No headache?”

“No. But I want to visit the bathroom. I can’t exactly relax with a bedpan.”

“Of course.”

John emerged, frowning. “I don’t notice any particular memory improvement.”

“That will take some time and will be gradual. The disinhibitor must leak across the blood-brain barrier, you know,” said Anderson.

4

It was nearly midnight when Susan broke what had turned out to be an oppressively silent evening in which neither had much responded to the television.

She said, “You’ll have to stay here overnight. I don’t want you alone when we don’t really know what’s going to happen.”

“I don’t feel a thing,” said John, gloomily. “I’m still me.”

“I’ll settle for that, Johnny,” said Susan. “Do you feel any pains or discomforts or oddnesses at all?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I wish we hadn’t done it.”

“For the firm,” said John, smiling weakly. “We’ve got to take some chances for the firm.”

5

John slept poorly, and woke drearily, but on time. And he arrived at work on time, too, to start the new week.

By 11 A.M. however, his morose air had attracted the unfavorable attention of his immediate superior, Michael Ross. Ross was burly and black-browed and fit the stereotype of the stevedore without being one. John got along with him though he did not like him.

Ross said, in his bass-baritone, “What’s happened to your cheery disposition, Heath—your jokes—your lilting laughter?” Ross cultivated a certain preciosity of speech as though he were anxious to negate the stevedore image.

“Don’t exactly feel tip-top,” said John, not looking up.

“Hangover?”

“No, sir,” said John, coldly.

“Well, cheer up, then. You’ll win no friends, scattering stinkweeds over the fields as you gambol along.”

John would have liked to groan. Ross’s subliterary affectations were wearisome at the best of times and this wasn’t the best of times.

And to make matters worse, John smelled the foul odor of a rancid cigar and knew that James Arnold Prescott—the head of the sales division—could not be far behind.

Nor was he. He looked about, and said, “Mike, when and what did we sell Rahway last spring or thereabouts? There’s some damned question about it and I think the details have been miscomputerized.”

The question was not addressed to him, but John said quietly, “Forty-two vials of PCAP. That was on April 14, J.P., invoice number P-20543, with a five percent discount granted on payment within thirty days. Payment, in full, received on May 5.”

Apparently everyone in the room had heard that. At least, everyone looked up.

Prescott said, “How the hell do you happen to know all that?”

John stared at Prescott for a moment, a vast surprise on his face. “I just happened to remember, J.P.”

“You did, eh? Repeat it.”

John did, faltering a bit, and Prescott wrote it down on one of the papers on John’s desk, wheezing slightly as the bend at his waist compressed his portly abdomen up against his diaphragm and made breathing difficult. John tried to duck the smoke from the cigar without seeming to do so.

Prescott said, “Ross, check this out on your computer and see if there’s anything to it at all.” He turned to John with an aggrieved look. “I don’t like practical jokers. What would you have done if I had accepted these figures of yours and walked off with them?”

“I wouldn’t have done anything. They’re correct,” said John, conscious of himself as the full center of attention.

Ross handed Prescott the readout. Prescott looked at it and said, “This is from the computer?”

“Yes, J.P.”

Prescott stared at it, then said, with a jerk of his head toward John, ” And what’s he? Another computer? His figures were correct.”

John tried a weak smile, but Prescott growled and left, the stench of his cigar a lingering reminder of his presence.

Ross said, “What the hell was that little bit of legerdemain, Heath? You found out what he wanted to know and looked it up in advance to get some kudos?”

“No, sir,” said John, who was gathering confidence. “I just happened to remember. I have a good memory for these things.”

“And took the trouble to keep it from your loyal companions all these years? There’s no one here who had any idea you hid a good memory behind that unremarkable forehead of yours.”

“No point in showing it, Mr. Ross, is there? Now when I have, it doesn’t seem to have gained me any goodwill, does it?”

And it hadn’t. Ross glowered at him and turned away.

6

John’s excitement over the dinner table at Gino’s that night made it difficult for him to talk coherently, but Susan listened patiently and tried to act as a stabilizing force.

“You might just have happened to remember, you know,” she said. “By itself it doesn’t prove anything, Johnny.”

“Are you crazy?” He lowered his voice at Susan’s gesture and quick glance about. He repeated in a semiwhisper, ” Are you crazy? You don’t suppose it’s the only thing I remember, do you? I think I can remember anything I ever heard. It’s just a question of recall. For instance, quote some line out of Shakespeare.”

“To be or not to be.”

John looked scornful. “Don’t be funny. Oh, well, it doesn’t matter. The point is that if you recite any line, I can carry on from there for as long as you like. I read some of the plays for English Lit classes at college and some for myself and I can bring any of it back. I’ve tried. It flows! I suppose I can bring back any part of any book or article or newspaper I’ve ever read, or any TV show I’ve ever watched—word for word or scene for scene.”

Susan said, “What will you do with all that?”

John said, “I don’t have that consciously in my head at all times. Surely you don’t—wait, let’s order—”

Five minutes later, he said, “Surely you don’t—My God, I haven’t forgotten where we left off. Isn’t it amazing?—Surely you don’t think I’m swimming in a mental sea of Shakespearean sentences at all times. The recall takes an effort, not much of one, but an effort.”

“How does it work?”

“I don’t know. How do you lift your arm? What orders do you give your muscles? You just will the arm to lift upward and it does so. It’s no trouble to do so, but your arm doesn’t lift until you want it to. Well, I remember anything I’ve ever read or seen when I want to but not when I don’t want to. I don’t know how to do it, but I do it.”

The first course arrived and John tackled it happily.

Susan picked at her stuffed mushrooms. “It sounds exciting.”

“Exciting? I’ve got the biggest, most wonderful toy in the world. My own brain. Listen, I can spell any word correctly and I’m pretty sure I won’t ever make any grammatical mistake.”

“Because you remember all the dictionaries and grammars you ever read?”

John looked at her sharply. “Don’t be sarcastic, Sue.”

“I wasn’t being—”

He waved her silent. “I never used dictionaries as light reading. But I do remember words and sentences in my reading and they were correctly spelled and correctly parsed.”

“Don’t be so sure. You’ve seen any word misspelled in every possible way and every possible example of twisted grammar, too.”

“Those were exceptions. By far the largest number of times I’ve encountered literary English, I’ve encountered it used correctly. It outweighs accidents, errors, and ignorance. What’s more, I’m sure I’m improving even as I sit here, growing more intelligent steadily.”

“And you’re not worried. What if—”

“What if I become too intelligent? Tell me how on Earth you think becoming too intelligent can be harmful.”

“I was going to say,” said Susan, coldly, “that what you’re experiencing is not intelligence. It’s only total recall.”

“How do you mean ‘only’? If I recall perfectly, if I use the English language correctly, if I know endless quantities of material, isn’t that going to make me seem more intelligent? How else need one define intelligence? You aren’t growing just a little jealous, are you, Sue?”

“No,” more coldly still. “I can always get an injection of my own if I feel desperate about it.”

John put down his fork. “You can’t mean that.”

“I don’t, but what if I did?”

“Because you can’t take advantage of your special knowledge to deprive me of my position.”

“What position?”

The main course arrived and for a few moments, John was busy. Then he said, in a whisper, “My position as the first of the future. Homo superior! There’ll never be too many of us. You heard what Kupfer said. Some are too dumb to make it. Some are too smart to change much. I’m the one!”

“Dead average.” One corner of Susan’s mouth lifted.

“Once I was. There’ll be others like me eventually. Not many, but there’ll be others. It’s just that I want to make my mark before the others come along. It’s for the firm, you know. Us!”

He remained lost in thought thereafter, testing his brain delicately.

Susan ate in an unhappy silence.

7

John spent several days organizing his memories. It was like the preparation of an orderly reference book. One by one, he recalled all his experiences in the six years he had spent at Quantum Pharmaceuticals and all he had heard and all the papers and memos he had read.

There was no difficulty in discarding the irrelevant and unimportant and storing them in a “hold till further notice” compartment where they did not interfere with his analysis. Other items were put in order so that they established a natural progression.

Against that skeletal organization, he resurrected the scuttlebutt he had heard; the gossip, malicious or otherwise; casual phrases and interjections at conferences which he had not been conscious of hearing at the time. Those items which did not fit anywhere against the background he had built up in his head were worthless, empty of factual content. Those which did fit clicked firmly into place and could be seen as true by that mere fact.

The further the structure grew, and the more coherent, the more significant new items became and the easier it was to fit them in.

Ross stopped by John’s desk on Thursday. He said, “I want to see you in my office at the nonce, Heath, if your legs will deign to carry you in that direction.”

John rose uneasily. “Is it necessary?’ I’m busy.”

“Yes, you look busy.” Ross looked over the clear desk which, at the moment, held nothing but a studio photo of a smiling Susan. “You’ve been this busy all week. But you’ve asked me whether seeing me in my office is necessary. For me, no; but for you, vital. There’s the door to my office. There’s the door to the hell out of here. Choose one or the other and do it fast.”

John nodded and, without undue hurry, followed Ross into his office.

Ross seated himself behind his desk but did not invite John to sit. He maintained a hard stare for a moment, then said, “What the hell’s got into you this week, Heath? Don’t you know what your job is?”

“To the extent that I have done it, it would seem that I do,” said John. “The report on microcosmic is on your desk and complete and seven days ahead of deadline. I doubt that you can have complaints about it.”

“You doubt, do you? Do I have permission to have complaints if I choose to after communing with my soul? Or am I condemned to applying to you for permission?”

“I apparently have not made myself plain, Mr. Ross. I doubt that you have rational complaints about it. To have those of the other variety is entirely up to you.”

Ross rose now. “Listen, punk, if I decide to fire you, you won’t get the news by word of mouth. It won’t be anything I say that will give you the glad tidings. You will go out through the door in a violent tumble and mine will be the propulsive force behind that tumble. Just keep that in your small brain and your tongue in your big mouth. Whether you’ve done your work or not is not at question right now. Whether you’ve done everyone else’s is. Who and what gives you the right to manage everyone in this place?”

John said nothing.

Ross roared, “Well?”

John said, “Your order was ‘Keep your tongue in your big mouth.’ ”

Ross turned a dangerous red. “You will answer questions, however.”

John said, “I am not aware that I have been managing anyone.”

“There’s not a person in the place you haven’t corrected at least once. You have gone over Willoughby’s head in connection with the correspondence on the TMP’s; you have been into general files using Bronstein’s computer access; and God knows what else I haven’t yet been told about and all in the last two days. You are disrupting the work of this department and it must cease this moment. There must be dead calm, and instantaneously, or it will be tornado weather for you, my man.”

John said, “If I have interfered in the narrow sense, it has been for the good of the company. In the case of Willoughby, his treatment of the TMP matter was putting Quantum Pharmaceuticals in violation of government regulations, something I have pointed out to you in one of several memos I have sent you which you apparently have not had occasion to read. As for Bronstein, he was simply ignoring general directions and costing the company fifty thousand in unnecessary tests, something I was easily able to establish by locating the necessary correspondence—merely to corroborate my clear memory of the situation.”

Ross was swelling visibly through the talk. “Heath,” he said, “you are usurping my role. You will, therefore, gather your personal effects and be off the premises before lunch, never to return. If you do, I will take extreme pleasure in helping you out again with my foot. Your official notice of dismissal will be in your hands, or down your throat, before your effects will be collected, work as quickly as you may.”

John said, “Don’t try to bully me, Ross. You’ve cost the company a quarter of a million dollars through incompetence and you know it.”

There was a short pause as Ross deflated. He said, cautiously, “What are you talking about?”

“Quantum Pharmaceuticals went down to the wire on the Nutley bid and missed out because a certain piece of information that was in your hands stayed in your hands and never got to the Board of Directors. You either forgot or you didn’t bother and in either case you are not the man for your job. You are either incompetent or have sold out.”

“You’re insane.”

“No one need believe me. The information is in the computer, if one knows where to look and I know where to look. What’s more, the knowledge is on file and will be on the desks of the interested parties two minutes after I leave these premises.”

“If this were so,” said Ross, speaking with difficulty, “you could not possibly know. This is a stupid attempt at blackmail by threat of slander.”

“You know it’s not slander. If you doubt that I have the information, let me tell you that there is one memorandum that is not in the records but can be reconstructed without too much difficulty from what is there. You would have to explain its absence and it will be presumed you have destroyed it. You know I’m not bluffing.”

“It’s still blackmail.”

“Why? I’m making no demands and no threats. I’m merely explaining my actions of the past two days. Of course, if I’m forced to resign, I’ll have to explain why I resigned, won’t I?”

Ross said nothing.

John said, coolly, “Is my resignation being requested?”

“Get out of here!”

“With my job? Or without it?”

Ross said, “You have your job.” His face was a study in hatred.

8

Susan had arranged a dinner at her apartment and had gone to considerable trouble for it. Never, in her own opinion, had she looked more enticing and never did she think it more important to move John, at least for a bit, away from his total concentration on his own mind.

She said, with an attempt at heartiness, ” After all, we are celebrating the last nine days of single blessedness.”

“We are celebrating more than that,” said John with a grim smile. “It’s only four days since I got the the disinhibitor and already I’ve been able to put Ross in his place. He’ll never bother me again.”

“We each seem to have our own notion of sentiment,” said Susan. “Tell me the details of your tender remembrance.”

John told the tale crisply, repeating the conversation verbatim and without hesitation.

Susan listened stonily, without in any way rising to the gathering triumph in John’s voice. “How did you know all that about Ross?”

John said, “There are no secrets, Sue. Things just seem secret because people don’t remember. If you can recall every remark, every comment, every stray word made to you or in your hearing and consider them all in combination, you find that everyone gives himself away in everything. You can pick out meanings that will, in these days of computerization, send you straight to the necessary records. It can be done. I can do it. I have done it in the case of Ross. I can do it in the case of anybody with whom I associate.”

“You can also get them furious.”

“I got Ross furious. You can bet on that.”

“Was that wise?”

“What can he do to me? I’ve got him cold.”

“He has enough clout in the upper echelons—”

“Not for long. I have a conference set for 2 P.M. tomorrow with old man Prescott and his stinking cigar and I’ll cut Ross off at the pass.”

“Don’t you think you’re moving too quickly?”

“Moving too quickly? I haven’t even begun. Prescott’s just a stepping-stone. Quantum Pharmaceutical’s just a stepping-stone.”

“It’s still too quick, Johnny, you need someone to direct you. You need—”

“I need nothing. With what I have,” he tapped his temple, “there’s no one and nothing that can stop me.”

Susan said, “Well, look, let’s not discuss that. We have different plans to make.”

“Plans?”

“Our own. We’re getting married in just under nine days. Surely”—with heavy irony—”you haven’t returned to the sad old days when you forgot things.”

“I remember the wedding,” said John, testily, “but at the moment I’ve got to reorganize Quantum. In fact, I’ve been thinking seriously of postponing the wedding till I have things well in hand.”

“Oh? And when might that be?”

“That’s hard to tell. Not long at the rate I’m taking hold. A month or two, I suppose. Unless,” and he descended into sarcasm, “you think that’s moving too quickly.”

Susan was breathing hard. “Were you planning to consult with me on the matter?”

John raised his eyebrows. “Would it have been necessary? Where’s the argument? Surely you see what’s happening. We can’t interrupt it and lose momentum. Listen, did you know I’m a mathematical wiz? I can multiply and divide as fast as a computer because at some time in my life I have come across almost every simple bit of arithmetic and I can recall the answers. I read a table of square roots and I can—”

Susan cried, “My God, Johnny, you are a kid with a new toy. You’ve lost your perspective. Instant recall is good for nothing but playing tricks with. It doesn’t give one bit more intelligence; not an ounce; not a speck more of judgment; not a whiff more of common sense. You’re about as safe to have around as a little boy with a loaded grenade. You need looking after by someone with brains.”

John scowled. “Do I? It seems to me that I’m getting what I want.”

“Are you? Isn’t it true that I’m what you want also?”

“What?”

“Go ahead, Johnny. You want me. Reach out and take me. Exercise that remarkable recall you have. Remember who I am, what I am, the things we can do, the warmth, the affection, the sentiment.”

John, with his forehead still creased in uncertainly, extended his arms toward Susan.

She stepped out of them. “But you haven’t got me, or anything about me. You can’t remember me into your arms; you have to love me into them. The trouble is, you don’t have the good sense to do it and you lack the intelligence to establish reasonable priorities. Here, take this and get out of my apartment or I’ll hit you with something a lot heavier.”

He stopped to pick up the engagement ring. “Susan—”

“I said, get out. The firm of Johnny and Sue is hereby dissolved.”

Her face blazed anger and John turned meekly and left.

9

When he arrived at Quantum the next morning, Anderson was waiting for him with a look of anxious impatience on his face.

“Mr. Heath,” he said, smiling and rising.

“What do you want?” demanded John.

“We are private here, I take it?”

“The place isn’t bugged as far as I know.”

“You are to report to us day after tomorrow for examination. On Sunday. You recall that?”

“Of course, I recall that. I’m incapable of not recalling. I am capable of changing my mind, however. Why do I need an examination?”

“Why not, sir? It is quite plain from what Kupfer and I have picked up that the treatment seems to have worked splendidly. Actually, we don’t want to wait till Sunday. If you can come with me today—now, in fact—it would mean a great deal to us, to Quantum, and, of course, to humanity.”

John said, curtly, “You might have held on to me when you had me. You sent me about my business, allowing me to live and work unsupervised so that you could test me under field conditions, and get a better idea of how things would work out. It meant more risk for me, but you didn’t worry about that, did you?”

“Mr. Heath, that was not in our minds. We—”

“Don’t tell me that. I remember every last word you and Kupfer said to me last Sunday, and it’s quite clear to me that that was in your minds. So if I take the risk, I accept the benefits. I have no intention of presenting myself as a biochemical freak who has achieved my ability at the end of a hypodermic needle. Nor do I want others of the sort wandering around. For now, I have a monopoly and I intend to use it. When I’m ready—not before—I will be willing to cooperate with you and benefit humanity. But just remember, I’m the one who will know when I’m ready, not you. So don’t call me; I’ll call you.”

Anderson managed a soft smile. “As to that, Mr. Heath, how can you stop us from making our announcement? Those who have dealt with you this week will have no trouble in recognizing the change in you and in testifying to it.”

“Really? See here, Anderson, listen closely and do so without that foolish grin on your face. It irritates me. I told you I remember every word you and Kupfer spoke. I remember every nuance of expression, every sidelong glance. It all spoke volumes. I learned enough to check through sick-leave records with a good idea of what I was looking for. It would seem that I was not the first Quantum employee on whom you had tried the disinhibitor.”

Anderson was, indeed, not smiling. “That is nonsense.”

“You know it is not, and you had better know I can prove it. I know the names of the men involved—one was a woman, actually—and the hospitals in which they were treated and the false history with which they were supplied. Since you did not warn me of this, when you used me as your fourth experimental animal on two legs, I owe you nothing but a prison sentence.”

Anderson said, “I won’t discuss this matter. Let me say this, though. The treatment will wear off, Heath. You won’t keep your total recall. You will have to come back for further treatment and you can be sure it will be on our terms.”

John said, “Nuts! You don’t suppose I haven’t investigated your reports—at least, those you haven’t kept secret. And I already have a notion of what aspects you have kept secret. The treatment lasts longer in some cases than others. It invariably lasts longer where it is more effective. In my case, the treatment has been extraordinarily effective and it will endure a considerable time. By the time I come to you again, if I ever have to, I will be in a position where any failure on your part to cooperate will be swiftly devastating to you. Don’t even think of it.”

“You ungrateful—”

“Don’t bother me,” said John, wearily. “I have no time to listen to you froth. Go away, I have work to do.”

Anderson’s face was a study in fear and frustration as he left.

10

It was 2:30 P.M. when John walked into Prescott’s office, for once not minding the cigar smoke. It would not be long, he knew, before Prescott would have to choose between his cigars and his position.

With Prescott were Arnold Gluck and Lewis Randall, so that John had the grim pleasure of knowing he was facing the three top men in the division.

Prescott rested his cigar on top of an ashtray and said, “Ross has asked me to give you half an hour, and that’s all I will give you. You’re the one with the trick memory, aren’t you?”

“My name is John Health, sir, and I intend to present you with a rationalization of procedure for the company; one that will make full use of the age of computers and electronic communication and will lay the groundwork for further modification as the technology improves.”

The three men looked at each other. Gluck, whose creased face was tanned a leathery brown said, ” Are you an expert in office management?”

“I don’t have to be, sir. I have been here for six years and I recall every bit of the procedure in every transaction in which I have been involved. That means the pattern of such transactions is plain to me and its imperfections obvious. One can see toward what it is tending and where it is doing so wastefully and inefficiently. If you’ll listen, I will explain. You will find it easy to understand.”

Randall, whose red hair and freckles made him seem younger than he was, said sardonically, “Real easy, I hope, because we have trouble with hard concepts.”

“You won’t have trouble,” said John.

“And you won’t get a second more than twenty-one minutes,” said Prescott, looking at his watch.

“It won’t take that,” said John. “I have it diagrammed and I can talk quickly.”

It took fifteen minutes and the three management personnel were remarkably silent in that interval.

Finally Gluck said, with a hostile glance out of his small eyes, “It sounds as though you are saying we can get along with half the management we are employing these days. ”

“Less than half,” said John, coolly, “and be the more efficient for it. We can’t fire ordinary personnel at will because of the unions, though we can profitably lose them by attrition. Management is not protected, however, and can be let go. They’ll have pensions if they’re old enough and can get new jobs if they’re young enough. Our thought must be for Quantum.”

Prescott, who had maintained an ominous silence, now puffed furiously at his noxious cigar and said, “Changes like this have to be considered carefully and implemented, if at all, with the greatest of caution. What seems logical on paper can lose out in the human equation.”

John said, “Prescott, if this reorganization is not accepted within a week, and if I am not placed in charge of its implementation, I will resign. I will have no trouble in finding employment with a smaller firm where this plan can be far more easily put into practice. Beginning with a small group of management people, I can expand in both quantity and efficiency of performance without additional hiring and within a year I’ll drive Quantum into bankruptcy. It would be fun to do this if I am driven to it, so consider carefully. My half hour is up. Goodbye.” And he left.

11

Prescott looked after him with a glance of frigid calculation. He said to the other two, “I think he means what he says and that he knows every facet of our operations better than we do. We can’t let him go.”

“You mean we’ve got to accept his plan,” said Randall, shocked.

“I didn’t say that. You two go, and remember this whole thing is confidential.”

Gluck said, “I have the feeling that if we don’t do something, all three of us will find ourselves on our butts in the street within a month.”

“Very likely,” said Prescott, “so we’ll do something.”

“What?”

“If you don’t know, you won’t get hurt. Leave it to me. Forget it for now and have a nice weekend.”

When they were gone, he thought a while, chewing furiously on his cigar. He then turned to his telephone and dialed an extension. “Prescott here. I want you in my office first thing Monday morning. First thing. Hear me?”

12

Anderson looked a trifle disheveled. He had had a bad weekend. Prescott, who had had a worse, said to him, malevolently, “You and Kupfer tried again, didn’t you?”

Anderson said, softly, “It’s better not to discuss that, Mr. Prescott. You remember it was agreed that in certain aspects of research, a distance was to be established. We were to take the risks or the glory, and Quantum was to share in the latter but not in the former.”

“And your salary was doubled with a guarantee of all legal payments to be Quantum’s responsibility, don’t forget that. This man, John Heath, was treated by you and Kupfer, wasn’t he? Come on. There’s no mistaking it. There’s no point in hiding it.”

“Well, yes.”

“And you were so brilliant that you turned him loose on us—this—this—tarantula.”

“We didn’t anticipate this would happen. When he didn’t go into instant shock, we thought it was our first chance to test the process in the field. We thought he would break down after two or three days, or it would pass.”

Prescott said, “If I hadn’t been protected So damned well, I wouldn’t have put the whole thing out of my mind and I would have guessed what had happened when that bastard first pulled the computer bit and produced the details of correspondence he had no business remembering. All right, we know where we are now. He’s holding the company to ransom with a new plan of operations he can’t be allowed to put through. Also, he can’t be allowed to walk away from us.”

Anderson said, “Considering Heath’s capacity for recall and synthesis, is it possible that his plan of operations may be a good one?”

“I don’t care if it is. That bastard is after my job and who knows what else and we’ve got to get rid of him.”

“How do you mean, rid of him? He could be of vital importance to the cerebro-chemical project.”

“Forget that. It’s a disaster. You’re creating a super-Hitler.” Anderson said, in a soft-voiced anguish, “The effect will wear off.”

“Yes? When?”

“At this moment, I can’t be sure.”

“Then I can’t take chances. We’ve got to make our arrangements and do it tomorrow at the latest. We can’t wait any longer.”

13

John was in high good humor. The manner in which Ross avoided him when he could and spoke to him deferentially when he had to affected the entire work force. There was a strange and radical change in the pecking order, with himself at the top.

Nor could John deny to himself that he liked it. He reveled in it. The tide was moving strongly and unbelievably swiftly. It was only nine days since the injection of the disinhibitor and every step had been forward.

Well, no, there had been Susan’s silly rage at him, but he would deal with her later. When he showed her the heights to which he would climb in nine additional days—in ninety—

He looked up. Ross was at his desk, waiting for his attention but reluctant to do anything as crass as to attract that attention by as much as clearing his throat. John swiveled his chair, put his feet out before him in an attitude of relaxation, and said, “Well, Ross?”

Ross said, carefully, “I would like to see you in my office, Heath. Something important has come up and, frankly, you’re the only one who can set it straight.”

John got slowly to his feet. “Yes? What is it?”

Ross looked about mutely at the busy room, with at least five men in reasonable earshot. Then he looked toward his office door and held out an inviting arm.

John hesitated, but for years Ross had held unquestioned authority over him’; and at this moment he reacted to habit.

Ross held his door open for John politely, stepped through himself and closed the door behind him, locking it unobtrusively and remaining in front of it. Anderson stepped out from the other side of the bookcase.

John said sharply, “What’s all this about?”

“Nothing at all, Heath,” said Ross, his smile turning into a vulpine grin. “We’re just going to help you out of your abnormal state—take you back to normality. Don’t move Heath.”

Anderson had a hypodermic in his hand. “Please, Heath, do not struggle. We wish you no harm.”

“If I yell—” said John.

“If you make any sound,” said Ross, “I will put a hammerlock on you and hold it till your eyes bug out. I would like to do that, so please try to yell.”

John said, “I have the goods on both of you, safe on deposit. Anything that happens to me—”

“Mr. Heath,” said Anderson, “nothing will happen to you. Something is going to unhappen to you. We will put you back to where you were. That would happen anyway, but we will hurry it up just a little.”

“So I’m going to hold you, Heath,” said Ross, “and you won’t move because if you do, you will disturb our friend with the needle and he might slip and give you more than the carefully calculated dose, and you might end up unable to remember anything at all.”

Heath was backing away, breathless. “That’s what you’re planning. You think you’ll be safe that way. If I forgot all about you, all about the information, all about its storage. But—”

“We’re not going to hurt you, Heath,” said Anderson. John’s forehead glistened with sweat. A near paralysis gripped him.

“An amnesiac!” he said, huskily, and with a terror that only someone could feel at the possibility who himself had perfect recall.

“Then you won’t remember this either, will you?” said Ross. “Go ahead, Anderson.”

“Well,” muttered Anderson, in resignation. “I’m destroying a perfect test subject.” He lifted John’s flaccid arm and readied the hypodermic.

There was a knock at the door. A clear voice called, “John!”

Anderson froze almost automatically: looking up questioningly.

Ross had turned to look at the door. Now he turned back. “Shoot that stuff into him, doc, ” he said in an urgent whisper.

The voice came again, “Johnny, I know you’re in there. I’ve called the police. They’re on the way.”

Ross whispered again, “Go ahead. She’s lying. And by the time they come, it’s over. Who can prove anything?”

But Anderson was shaking his head vigorously. “It’s his fiancée. She knows he was treated. She was there.”

“You jackass.”

There was the sound of a kick against the door and then the voice sounded in a muffled, “Let go of me. They’ve got—let go!”

Anderson said, “Having her push the thing was the only way we could get him to agree. Besides, I don’t think we have to do anything. Look at him.”

John had collapsed in a comer, eyes glazed, and clearly in a state of unconscious trance.

Anderson said, “He’s been terrified and that can produce a shock that will interfere with recall under normal conditions. I think the disinhibitor has been wiped out. Let her in and let me talk to her.”

14

Susan looked pale as she sat with her arm protectively about the shoulders of her ex-fiancé. “What happened?”

“You remember the injection of—”

“Yes, yes. What happened?”

“He was supposed to come to our office day before yesterday, Sunday, for a thorough examination. He didn’t come. We worried and the reports from his superiors had me very perturbed. He was becoming arrogant, megalomaniacal, irascible—perhaps you noticed. You’re not wearing your engagement ring.”

“We—quarreled,” said Susan. “Then you understand. He was—well, if he were an inanimate device, we might say his motor was overheating as it sped faster and faster. This morning it seemed absolutely essential to treat him. We persuaded him to come here, locked the door and—”

“Injected him with something while I howled and kicked outside.”

“Not at all,” said Anderson. “We would have used a sedative, but we were too late. He had what I can only describe as a breakdown. You may search his body for fresh punctures, which, as his fiancé, I presume you may do without embarrassment, and you will find none.”

Susan said, “I’ll see about that. What happens, now?”

“I am sure he will recover. He will be his old self again.”

“Dead average?”

“He will not have perfect recall, but until ten days ago, he never had. Naturally, the firm will give him indefinite leave on full salary. If any medical treatment is required, all medical expenses will be paid. And when he feels like it, he can return to active duty.”

“Yes? Well, I will want all that in writing before the day is out, or I see my lawyer tomorrow.”

“But Miss Collins,” said Anderson, “you know that Mr. Heath volunteered. You were willing too.”

“I think,” said Susan, “that you know the situation was misrepresented to us and that you won’t welcome an investigation. Just see to it that what you’ve just promised is in writing.”

“You will have to, in return, sign an agreement to hold us guiltless of any misadventure your fiance may have suffered.”

“Possibly. I prefer to see what kind of misadventure it is first. Can you walk, Johnny?”

John nodded and said, a little huskily, “Yes, Sue.”

“Then let’s go.”

15

John had put himself outside a cup of good coffee and an omelet before Susan permitted discussion. Then he said, “What I don’t understand is how you happened to be there?”

“Shall we say woman’s intuition?”

“Let’s say Susan’s brains.”

“All right. Let’s! After I threw the ring at you, I felt self-pitying and aggrieved and after that wore off, I felt a severe sense of loss because, odd though it might seem to the average sensible person, I’m very fond of You.”

“I’m sorry, Sue,” said John, humbly.

“As well you should be. God, you were insupportable. But then I got to thinking that if you could get poor loving me that furious, what must you be doing to your co-workers. The more I thought about it, the more I thought they might have a strong impulse to kill you. Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m willing to admit you deserved killing, but only at my hands. I wouldn’t dream of allowing anyone else to do it. I didn’t hear from you—”

“I know, Sue. I had plans and I had no time—”

“You had to do it all in two weeks. I know, you idiot. By this morning I couldn’t stand it anymore. I came to see how you were and found you behind a locked door.”

John shuddered. “I never thought I’d welcome your kicking and screaming, but I did then. You stopped them.”

“Will it upset you to talk about it?”

“I don’t think so. I’m all right.”

“Then what were they doing?”

“They were going to re-inhibit me. I thought they might be giving me an overdose and make me an amnesiac.”

“Why?”

“Because they knew I had them all. I could ruin them and the company.”

“You really could. ”

“Absolutely.”

“But they didn’t actually inject you, did they? Or was that another of Anderson’s lies?”

“They really didn’t.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m not an amnesiac.”

“Well, I hate to sound like a Victorian damsel, but I hope you have learned your lesson.”

“If you mean, do I realize you were right, I do.”

“Then just let me lecture you for one minute, so you don’t forget again. You went about everything too rapidly, too openly, and with too much disregard for the possible violent counteraction of others. You had total recall and you mistook it for intelligence. If you had someone who was really intelligent to guide you—”

“I needed you, Sue.”

“Well, you’ve got me now, Johnny.”

“What do we do next, Sue?”

“First, we get that paper from Quantum and, since you’re all right, we’ll sign the release for them. Second, we get married on Saturday, just as we originally planned. Third, we’ll see—but, Johnny?”

“Yes?”

“You’re all right?”

“Couldn’t be better, Sue. Now we’re together, everything’s fine.”

16

It wasn’t a formal wedding. Less formal than they had originally planned and fewer guests. No one was there from Quantum, for instance. Susan had pointed out, quite firmly, that that would be a bad idea.

A neighbor of Susan ’s had brought a video camera to record the proceedings, something that seemed to John to be the height of schlock, but Susan had wanted it.

And then the neighbor had said to him with a tragic shrug, “Can’t get the damn thing to turn on. You’d think they’d give me one in working order. I’ll have to make a phone call.” He hastened down the steps to the pay phone in the chapel lobby.

John advanced to look at the camera curiously. An instruction booklet lay on a small table to one side. He picked it up and leafed through the pages with moderate speed, then. put it back. He looked about him, but everyone was busy. No one seemed to be paying attention to him.

He slid the rear panel to one side, unobtrusively, and peered inside. He then turned away and gazed at the opposite wall thoughtfully. He was still gazing even as his right hand snaked in toward the mechanism and made a quick adjustment. After a brief interval he put the rear panel back and flicked a toggle switch.

The neighbor came bustling back, looking exasperated. “How am I going to follow directions I can’t make head or—” He frowned, then said, “Funny. It’s on. It must have been working all the time.”

17

“You may kiss the bride,” said the minister, benignly, and John took Susan in his arms and followed orders with enthusiasm.

Susan whispered through unmoving lips, “You fixed that camera. Why?”

He whispered back, “I wanted everything right for the wedding.”

She whispered, “You wanted to show off.”

They broke apart, looking at each other through love-misted eyes, then fell into another embrace, while the small audience stirred and tittered.

Susan whispered, “You do it again, and I’ll skin you. As long as no one knows you still have it, no one will stop you. We’ll have it all within a year, if you follow directions.”

“Yes, dear,” whispered Johnny, humbly.