

72-Hour Party People

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It comes wrapped in red foil and purple tissue, this intricate figurine molded in the form of a Japanese demon, with clawed feet, a mane of fire and a thick tongue jutting from a bloodthirsty smirk. Transparent and the size of a child's fist, it looks like a tiny ice carving or a statuette of glass. It is neither. In fact, it is 25 grams (a little less than one ounce) of nearly 100 percent pure crystallized methamphetamine hydrochloride, known on the streets of Asia as "Shabu." It was almost certainly manufactured in a clandestine laboratory in China, then shipped to the Philippines and on to Hawaii, and finally to Denver. Here it was purchased on the black market for \$5,500 — nearly five times the street value of an equivalent amount of cocaine and ten times that of low-grade, powdered crystal meth.

Shabu is so expensive because it is so pure — and therefore so powerful. Most of the home-cooked speed in Denver is only 10 to 20 percent actual crystallized methamphetamine, adulterated with toxic by-products of the makeshift ingredients used in crude manufacturing processes. While any twaker with a hot plate can whip together a batch of bathtub speed, Shabu requires a trained chemist working in a fully equipped laboratory with uncorrupted components. The result is pharmaceutical-grade meth — 95-plus percent pure.

As much as the word can be applied to an illegal drug, Shabu is clean.

"There's no horse deworming medicine in this shit, okay? You can't make this kind of shit out of road flares and cold pills," says Nick, delicately unwrapping the Shabu demon atop the burnished steel of his Swedish designer coffee table.

"This is the shit JFK was getting jacked in his ass during the Cuban missile crisis. I shouldn't even be calling this shit 'shit,' because it's disrespectful."

Nick peels away the last scrap of foil and positions the demon in the center of the coffee table, surrounding it with a careful arrangement of long-stemmed glass pipes, miniature butane torches and razor-sharp utility knives.

On this Thursday afternoon in late summer, Nick is preparing the second-floor recreation room of his fashionably appointed Highland home for what has become a twice-a-month ritual of extreme indulgence for a revolving group of five to ten fellow hip, young and successful citizens of Denver.

"Basically," he says, "we blast off Thursday night and don't pull the chute until Sunday."

During their 72-hour run, he and his friends will eat little solid food save fruit, so Nick's fridge and freezer are stocked with the makings for smoothies. Along with yogurt, organic apple juice and frozen blackberries, strawberries and mangoes are five bottles of Moët champagne, a dozen bottles of Italian sparkling water, four cases of microbrew, two bottles of chilled New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc and a discount-warehouse carton of 400 Otter Pops.

Speed-binge supplies of a different nature have been cached in a master-bathroom medicine cabinet — one bottle holding ninety Valiums and another with forty tablets of ProVigil, the market name for the experimental drug Modafonil, a sleep suppressant the U.S. military tested on fighter and bomber pilots in Afghanistan and Iraq. Modafonil is now prescribed for cancer patients to combat the chronic-fatigue side effects of chemotherapy. Nick has laid in a supply because he claims he's found that combining Modafonil with Shabu takes the edge off the undesirable psychological whammies of sleep deprivation, including auditory hallucinations and paranoid delusions.

"One night without sleep is just staying up all night," he says. "People do that straight or just with coffee all the time. You feel a little zoned-out in the morning, but by midday, your natural rhythm kicks in. So long as you get some sleep that following night, you're cool. But when you ride the party train two nights in a row, or three nights, things can start to get a little odd, a little slippery. And if somebody spins out, it's no fun."

In other words, a sudden case of amphetamine psychosis really brings a party down.

"I consider this shit an excellent use of my tax dollars," Nick says, rattling a bottle of ProVigil. "It helps keep people from going werewolf around hour 50."

He buys his ProVigil from a psychiatrist friend of a friend who works in several Veterans Affairs hospitals counseling and treating terminal cancer patients. When the patients die, their families don't know what to do with their ProVigil pills, so they give them to the psychiatrist, who gives them to Nick's friend, who sells them to Nick.

All he'll say about this Shabu is that it comes from Hawaii and that he has a source — another friend of a friend — who flies to Honolulu once every other month, buying two or three statuettes at a time for resale in Denver and Colorado Springs. It's no big syndicate, just small-time narcotics

smuggling where the payoff is a free trip to Hawaii, a little extra spending money and the rush of getting away with it.

The rush of Shabu itself is freakishly powerful. A single minuscule hit — about one-tenth of a gram, vaporized and inhaled — is enough to keep a weekend warrior like Nick riding the lightning for twelve hours.

The statuette on Nick's coffee table, cut into tiny pieces and smoked, holds about 250 hits.

Like opium, Shabu is relatively exotic in the United States (except for Hawaii, where it rivals cocaine in popularity), but in Asia, it's cheap and prevalent. The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency claimed earlier this year that 11 percent of the Philippine population uses Shabu. The drug is popular in Japan and Thailand and is so pervasive among the professional classes in Indonesia that the government of that country last year instituted mandatory Shabu-specific drug testing of all public officials.

Nick discovered Shabu during a 1999 vacation in Bali at a full-moon beach rave. He took one hit, danced all night, frolicked in the sand and surf the next day, and didn't do the drug again for more than three years — until early this year, when he learned of his amigo's Hawaiian connection.

Since then, he's become a Shabu vector in his social set.

Shabu is radically addictive. Yet Nick seems unfazed by his own estimate that in less than half a year, he has personally introduced the drug to more than a dozen people who now smoke it with him all weekend long at least once a month, if not twice. He and his party posse burn through a 25-gram chunk of Shabu every three or four weekends, which means they've each cultivated about a \$300-per-month habit.

Nick doesn't see himself as a drug dealer so much as the self-appointed ringleader of his own private Cirque de Shabu.

He's thrown nine Shabu parties since March.

The tenth begins tonight.

Hour 1

The seven eager speed smokers who converge on Nick's pad during the two hours before sunset defy the myth that crystal meth is a white-trash drug. They have cool hair and stylish attire. They have college degrees. They have all their teeth.

They do their lift-off hits upstairs, kneeling around the steel coffee table alone or in pairs, shaving flakes off the statuette, melting them in the pipes with a mini-torch, inhaling, holding, holding, holding and then blowing out colorless vapors that smell subtly of rotten roses.

Invariably, a second after they exhale they grin a wide, scheming grin, not unlike the demon's. And then they begin to jabber, free-associating at warp 9.

"Oh, my God, you know the fucking war, right? The liberation, the occupation, whatever? And the Palestinians, right? And the Israelis and the Muslims and Hindus and all the hate and the fucking guns and the bombs and the, uh, the, uh, you know, all the children with their legs blown off by land mines in Afghanistan, right? You see what I'm saying? I mean, you all know, you've all seen like a million times that one picture of that little boy from Afghanistan, right? And he's in his little purple robe, with his little white shepherd's hat, and his little *Christmas Carol*, um, what do you call it? His Tiny Tim crutches, you know, right? And he's got these, like, you know, like these little sad, brown, puppy dog, fucking abused-animal, dog-pound, take-me-home-please eyes, right? I mean, God...okay, right now, let's get online, and let's find out who he is and where he lives and, and, and, let's find out what we need to do to buy him a new leg, right now! Who's got a laptop?"

Bonnie is 27 and a florist. She has her own business arranging and delivering flowers for high-end caterers. This marks her second weekend at Nick's. She's done cocaine before, but had never tried any form of speed until her boyfriend brought her to this place for an after-party the morning following Rave on the Rocks, the electronic dance-music festival at Red Rocks this past July. Shabu, she says, is "like sticking your brain in a huge pencil sharpener and grinding it and grinding it and grinding it until everything you see and think is just super, super sharp."

Hour 5

The one-legged Afghan child was quickly forgotten.

Bonnie did, however, locate a laptop with a wireless Internet connection and has now been reclining in a black leather Eames chair, bug-eyed before the glowing sixteen-inch screen, chain-munching Otter Pops and Net-surfing, for more than four uninterrupted hours.

She accosts anyone who walks by the door to the room with the same request: "Hey, could you bring me another Otter Pop?"

In the next room are Marcus, a custom interior house painter, and his wife, Heather, who works in marketing for a popular brand of whiskey. The happy couple is viewing a bootlegged DVD of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* on a big-screen TV while frantically flipping through a leather-bound edition of J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy classic of the same name, trying to match the text to the movie. Whenever a line of dialogue is altered, a scene cut or a plot point relocated in the film, Marcus and Heather call it out to Sasha, a dreadlocked artist who's drawing a huge, elaborate pen-and-ink diagram on a sheet of butcher paper. The diagram's title is "Two Towers: Film vs. Book, a Deconstruction."

Aha, Heather exclaims, her voice charged with the thrill of discovery. "The Wold Riders never dragged Aragorn over the cliff on their way to Helm's Deep. That is total fucking Hollywood bullshit! Sasha, you got it?"

A grandfather clock strikes midnight.

In the living room, Nick is seated across a marble chess set from Jason, a landscape architect wearing orange-tinted sunglasses. Surrounded by computer printouts, the pair have been playing for hours, re-creating 1997's epic seven-game rematch between world chess champion Garry Kasparov and the IBM computer Deep Blue move for move, playing each game all the way through, precisely as it was played by man against machine.

"This is so intense," declares Jason. "It's like I know what the computer was thinking."

Hour 12

The light of the sun rising outside is totally blocked by the tapestries pinned over the closed drapes and blinds covering all of the windows in Nick's house, creating the timeless vibe of a casino.

For three hours now, Marcus and Nick have taken turns mixing records behind the set of dual turntables in the parlor. Their selections have proven quite eclectic: Michael Jackson mashed with Iron Maiden, Jamaican dancehall fading into French hip-hop, recordings of 1960s Black Panther rallies laid over "Sweet Home Alabama."

More Shabu was smoked somewhere in the nether region of time between two and five this Friday morning. Now it's a few minutes after seven. Bonnie is back on the laptop. The weird music blasting downstairs has entranced Jason, who is lying on a couch, eyes closed, fists clenched, doing leg lifts

in halved time with the beat. The remainder of the crew — Sasha, Heather, Emile, a graphic designer, and Ike, who deals cocaine — have fled upstairs, where they sit in a circle in the Shabu smoking room, jabbering.

They talk over and across each other constantly, their conversations cross-pollinating, topics bursting into side topics and tangents: Malcolm X, Andy Warhol, West Nile virus, Alaskan salmon, cruise ships, Rastafarians, back-in-the-day MTV videos, *Schoolhouse Rock* cartoons, drug laws, gun laws, cop shootings, the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins. It goes on and on, ever-changing, devoid of weight. It is chitchat mania, right up until the discussion turns to why they're doing this, why they're sitting in a candlelit room on a workday morning, geeked out of their skulls.

Faced with this question, they fall silent for a few seconds, then take turns.

"I do it to feel like a kid again, to feel new again," says Emile, eliciting nods.

"Because I like to live fast and full," offers Sasha, who is licking her lips unconsciously and constantly.

Heather: "I guess I do it mostly because I get bored, and because of the extremeness of it, because I don't have to work today, and because fucking my husband when were both like this is godhead."

Ike: "Because I have really low self-esteem."

The room blows up in laughter.

Ike again: "No, seriously, I do it because I love to get high, pure and simple. I love to get high. I've got the gene. I just say yes."

Hour 17

Emile has barricaded himself in the television room.

Two hours ago, he muttered something about needing to run an errand, then left the house in a rush. He returned about 45 minutes later carrying a bulging, black plastic bag.

"Don't go out there," he said.

Then he disappeared into the television room, shutting the double doors and shoving furniture up against them from the inside. The doors will budge just enough to display a flickering bluish light indicating the big-screen TV is active.

Now Nick is murmuring through the slim crack in the doors, attempting to persuade Emile to let him inside. Eventually, there is a scraping sound from within the room, and the doors open wide enough for Nick to squeeze through, then shut quickly after him.

Minutes pass. The doors open, and Nick comes back out. The doors close.

"TV room's off limits indefinitely," the party host announces. "Emile needs some privacy."

In a lower voice, he confides the gritty details: "Emile's in there watching porn. He's got like twenty gang-bang DVDs stacked in alphabetical order."

Hour 24

Emile is still watching porn.

Everyone else is packing for Vegas.

It started about four hours ago, when Bonnie, still surfing the Net, came across a Web page covering the Lifestyles Convention, an annual weekend conference and after-hours bacchanalia that draws thousands of free-love swingers from across America and around the world. This summer's convention was held at the Mirage hotel and resort on the Strip in Las Vegas.

"We need to be there," Marcus said. "We should totally go." That sparked a chorus of squeals from the ladies and "Vegas, baby, Vegas!" exhortations from the gents.

Nick dug out the Sunday travel section from his recycling bin, found a discount broker, and within minutes had booked passage on a "worry-free" vacation company's chartered jet to Vegas, leaving Denver first thing the following morning, with a scheduled return early Sunday. He then phoned a car service and scheduled for two sedans to arrive on Saturday at 6 a.m. sharp.

"All the necessary arrangements have been made," he proclaimed.

This announcement set off a hearty round of Shabu smoking (Nick passed a loaded pipe into the TV room to Emile), champagne toasting and Otter Pop munching, followed by an hour-long discussion of what one should wear in Vegas in mid-August. Which was quickly followed by a sudden,

overpowering and panic-inducing group realization that no one in the group was wearing what they needed to be wearing in Vegas. And then a frenzied series of calls to cab companies to come get them right now so they could go home and raid their closets. And then finally another series of calls back to the taxi companies to cancel the cabs because Marcus decided he was fine, just fine, to drive and could definitely, absolutely, no problem fit everyone into his Pathfinder.

Ike, who has the same tall, lanky build as Nick, opted to stay behind and borrow a set of threads from his host. The rest of the group, sans porno boy, took off about four in the afternoon. On their way out, Nick pulled Marcus aside and muttered, "Why don't you pick up a few things for the Sketchinician while you're out and about?"

Marcus smiled knowingly and gave a sly nod of assent.

Five minutes ago the Wild Bunch returned, whirling dervishes with wide lapels, glittery makeup, short skirts and mirror shades.

Following a brief fashion show in the living room, everyone traipses upstairs to do another hit. The cycle is compressing. To stay high, they're doing hits every four to six hours instead of every eight to twelve. Nick breaks out the ProVigil and hands everyone a pill. They go downstairs and make smoothies. Nick checks on Emile again, gives him an Otter Pop, and reports back from the TV room that Emile is doing great and tells everyone hello.

Hour 33

There is a thief in the house.

They found the thief where they knew they would: within the underground labyrinth of Enigma, the after-hours club in Larimer Square, around three in the morning. They'd been out on the town since nine Friday night, guzzling flagons of sake at a sushi bar (but eating nothing: Ike ordered a plate of seared ahi and barely nibbled at it). They spent one hour and \$200 at a strip club downtown, then danced at the Alley Cat before finally winding up at Enigma, where the party goes until dawn.

They stayed just long enough to find and snare their prey — an underage crystal-meth snorter known as the Sketchinician. The Sketchinician apparently turns into a kleptomaniac when he's tweaking, which is pretty much whenever he's awake.

It's all going according to Nick's carefully laid plans. Before they'd gone out Friday night, they'd combed through the first floor of his house, securing all valuables, then baiting the living room and kitchen and parlor with cheap electronic equipment — junk cameras, battered Walkmans, laser

pointers and busted light-up *Star Wars* toys, the "few things for the Sketchinician" that Marcus had picked up at a couple of thrift stores during his afternoon foray out into the real world.

Now it's four in the morning, and they're pretending not to notice as the Sketchinician sketches around the house, pilfering the goods and then stashing them in his car during his repeated, always loudly announced "I'm just going to go and have a smoke" trips outside.

The Sketchinician is skilled, to a degree. No one ever actually sees him, say, snake the cracked-case Canon point-and-shoot off the end table. They just notice it's gone, and the whispered word spreads through the party: Check it out, the Sketchinician got the camera by the couch.

Then, in the denouement of this set piece, around five in the morning, Nick pretends to suddenly notice that all of his possessions are missing. And the Sketchinician? He plays it beautifully, fervently joining the search for the missing camera and laser pointer and Walkman and Darth Vader light saber, all of which Nick is distraught to lose, because he really, really wants them for the trip to Vegas.

"You see, that's how you know when a tweaker has it hard-core," Nick murmurs in another one of his conspiratorial whispers. "They'll steal shit from you, and then they'll help you look for it."

Hour 39

Vegas, baby, Vegas.

Nick crudely decapitated the Shabu demon before their rides to the airport arrived. "This is coming with us," he said, cradling the head in his hand. "The rest of this shit — the pipes, the torch and everything — leave it all. We'll figure it out in Vegas."

It's 105 degrees on the Strip, and it's not even noon yet, and everyone is sorely dehydrated and pouring sweat and crashing hard because they haven't had a hit for five hours and this is all starting to seem like not such a good idea after all. The plane landed a little over an hour ago, and the crew took a shuttle to the Strip, where they're now shuffling through the middle-American masses in the blast-furnace heat, slurping cheap, slushy, sugary drinks in two-foot-tall pink plastic Eiffel Towers they bought at the Paris casino.

It's just too damn hot out here to deal, and the casino floors are just too much right now, too, too many bells and whistles and "Wheel! Of! Fortune!" and old ladies with oxygen tanks and jacket-and-tie security guards. The world is looking drab and worn, like a pixie stripped of her glamour.

They need a hit. They need a sanctuary. They need the Venetian.

Hour 42

Team Shabu is smoking speed out of lightbulbs in the \$249-a-night Venezia Fontana luxury suite, in which they will spend a grand total of 45 minutes before descending to the casino floor.

"I have a poem I want everyone to hear," Marcus says, fishing a fresh bulb from the cardboard box of four General Electric 60-watts purchased earlier on the Strip. "It's about a moth and a lightbulb. I've memorized it for just this sort of five-star occasion."

His voice changes to that of a bereted poet giving a dramatic reading.

"I was talking to a moth the other evening," Marcus begins, thrusting the lightbulb up and away, then pondering it like Hamlet pondering a dagger. "He was trying to break into an electric lightbulb and fry himself on the wires."

Marcus pulls the lightbulb back, walks over to a dresser, and then, with one quick hammering motion, snaps off the bulb's aluminum screw-in plug. It falls to the carpet and he stares at it for a second, then at the teardrop-shaped piece of glass in his hand, which now has a jagged hole at the fat end.

"I forget the next part," he says, weaving on his feet and staring into the bulb's hole like a drunken pirate staring through a spyglass. "But the guy who's talking the poem asks the moth why the fuck he's trying to fry himself on the light, and the moth says..."

And here Marcus goes into the voice of the moth, rendered high and reedy, as if he had just inhaled helium: "We get bored with routine and crave beauty and excitement. Fire is beautiful, and we know that if we get too close it will kill us, but what does that matter? It is better to be happy for a moment and burned up with beauty than to live a long time and be bored all the while."

"Hell, yeah!" Bonnie says emphatically.

Marcus picks through the shards of Shabu on the dresser, chooses one the size of an almond sliver and drops it into the hole in the bulb. He asks for a lighter. Then he continues the poem, again in the voice of the moth.

"We wad all our life up into one little roll, and then we shoot the roll. It is better to be a part of beauty for one instant and then cease to exist than it is to exist forever and never be a part of

beauty. We are like human beings used to be before they became too civilized to enjoy themselves."

"No, wait, I fucked up."

He dances the flame of the lighter over the bulb. The Shabu inside bubbles, and smoke collects in the chamber of the bulb.

"I can only remember the last line, but before that, the moth flies into a lighter and dies, and the last line of the poem is the guy thinking to himself, I wish there was something I wanted as badly as the moth wanted to fry himself."

Marcus inhales the smoke from the hole in the lightbulb. Moments pass in silence. He exhales sickly sweet.

Bonnie: "Wait, are you saying we're all moths?"

Hour 48

Vegas, baby, Vegas. Cab rides and showgirls and the midway at Circus, Circus. Free drinks and bungee jumps and the light show above Fremont Street. Hits of speed smoked ghetto style in alleys off the Strip.

Ike breaks away from the pack to walk up and down both sides of Las Vegas Boulevard, practicing his border-town Spanish on the scores of Mexican men and women lining the sidewalks, wearing bright yellow shirts with black letters that read "A Naked Girl in Your Room in 30 Minutes!" The Mexicans are holding stacks of hundreds of garish cards advertising the services of prostitutes that they thrust before passersby. Ike begins feverishly collecting hooker cards. By night's end, he will have so many that they will spill from his pockets when he walks.

Hour 53

The party train is derailing.

The group gathers around a roulette table at Caesars Palace, betting twenty dollars each spin on red *and* black, until inevitably the ball lands on the green double zero, a house number, wiping them out.

The next hour is spent fruitlessly searching for Club Utopia, the after-hours electronic-dance music spot famed for its cage dancers, laser lights and a party that never stops — except, it seems, when the club is closed in the summer for remodeling.

Another hour disappears into the fog of an equally futile quest to find nickel slots on the Strip. The crew settles for a bank of quarter video-poker machines at a bar inside Harrah's, where the bartender pours the free drinks with a loose wrist and isn't too much of a stickler on the \$10-an-hour play rule. Their goal is to get drunk for the plane ride home. But no matter how much they drink, the speed kills the relaxing effects of the alcohol. They lose coordination and slur their speech but claim to never feel a buzz. They're hollow-eyed, stinking of sour sweat, limbs trembling slightly from the fatigue their minds still cannot register, wasting quarters by trying to fill inside straight after inside straight. They frequently space out mid-conversation, then snap to a few minutes later and pick up where they trailed off mid-sentence.

Depleted of lightbulbs and either unwilling or unable to head out to the Strip at dawn to buy more, they resort to snorting lines of crushed Shabu off the metal toilet-paper dispensers in the casinos restrooms. On the plane ride home, Nick, Ike and Bonnie all bleed from the nose.

Hour 64

Back at Nick's house, there are Otter Pop wrappers everywhere. Otter Pop wrappers on the hardwood floors, on the kitchen tile, on the toilet seats in all the bathrooms, in the sinks, on the turntables, on the couch cushions. They are hard, plastic, sticky, omnipresent evidence that something very strange and very wicked went down in this place.

And then there is Emile, passed out on the love seat in the parlor just inside the front door, shirtless, with what looks to be dried bright-blue goo smeared all over his bare chest. Judging by the Otter Pop wrapper dangling from his fingertips, he fell deep asleep mid-pop and then failed to wake as the blue ice melted on him, drip by drip.

The doors to the TV room are now open. The big screen displays the DVD menu for *Gang Bang Angels*.

Realizing that one hit isn't going to do much for them at this point, the Vegas vacationers each take three in quick succession.

Then the women spend the next three hours choreographing an elaborate and vaguely obscene dance routine to "Cameltoe" while Nick obligingly spins the one hit wonder single over and over and over and Marcus and Ike sit and watch and giggle.

Hour 72

Gang Bang Angels has been replaced by the Clint Eastwood spaghetti Western *A Fistful of Dollars*.

For a Few Dollars More is on deck.

Subdued by forty milligrams of Valium each, the fellowship of the pipe is splayed around the TV room on beanbags and cushions, listlessly eating soggy fruit like a bunch of drugged monkeys.

Ike, who is slowly building a three-tiered house of hooker cards, says, "Yo, that was fun while it lasted."

Heather: "Was it?"