

OVERWORKED

By J. E. Ellis

Daniel Warren sat in his dim office, night-sounds drifting in through the open window behind him, and watched himself fall apart.

As a broker, a man who found things people wanted, Daniel made his living by walking fast on a tightrope, where up-to-date insider information and the guts to act meant big paydays. He wasn't in it just for the money, though. The real kick came with closing a deal – the eleventh hour, fast-talking, profit-taking, blink-and-you-lose kind of closes. The adrenaline, the clarity, the focus: that kind of rush beat any chemical high he'd tried, and was his preferred drug.

The Friday night it all started, however, had capped off a tough week – seventeen deals and not one close. He had found himself killing time at Larry's, his regular watering hole, waiting for a phone call that would lead to scoring a couple of grams of coke, a far second-place substitute; he almost looked forward to the few hours of mindless bliss.

The bar had the usual dim lighting and dark decor of those places just off the financial district, and attracted the usual assortment of suits and expensive shoes. Daniel didn't quite fit in with the tan-and-trim crowd; he was stockier, with military hair and a dark goatee. Instead of conservative suits, he tended toward pullovers and slacks. In his business, it didn't pay to look too slick. Standing at the bar, he swallowed a gulp of his Heineken and watched a plump, balding man come through the door. He certainly wasn't a regular. Daniel had never seen him before. The newcomer, obviously out of his element, wore sweat pants, a faded Harvard T-shirt and worn Reebok tennis shoes. To Daniel, the guy looked to be in his forties; he had a pasty complexion that meant he probably hadn't seen the sun in months, maybe years.

Then he noticed the man's eyes. Daniel, whose success depended on reading people, had never seen eyes so cold, so intense. He couldn't reconcile the fire that burned within those

hooded sockets with the Pillsbury doughboy body. Despite the distant warning sounding in his brain, however, he was intrigued. He finished off his beer and ordered two more, then sauntered over to the stranger's table. He offered the bottle. "Buy you a beer?"

The other man looked up warily, then shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

"The name's Daniel Warren." He smiled and offered his hand, gave a quick shake and produced a business card, all with a well-practiced smoothness.

"Bob Adkins." He took a swig of the beer while looking at the card. "It says here that you're in 'acquisitions'. That sounds almost illegal."

Daniel chuckled. "Maybe it is at that. Would that bother you?"

"No," Bob said, smiling at last. "But I would make sure I could always see both your hands." They both laughed at that.

Daniel found himself warming up to Bob. He recognized the charm and quick camaraderie; Daniel used those same tactics with a new client. He enjoyed the challenge of trying to figure Bob's angle. He said he was a chemist doing pharmaceutical research, and that started him on a round of chemist jokes that had Daniel guffawing uncontrollably. Then Daniel's cell phone warbled – it was the phone call he was waiting for.

After hanging up, Daniel looked at Bob's shiny face and took a chance. "Listen, I need to take a ride. Want to come along?"

"Not anything illegal I hope." Bob chuckled knowingly. "Seriously. I have something you might be interested in. It's something we've been working on. Very smooth with a major kick."

Daniel nodded with sudden realization, seeing Bob in a new light. He's pushing his own stuff, looking for customers. Daniel understood that, and he relaxed; it all made sense now.

“Sure, we can talk about it. We can head to my condo after this one stop.” He stood, finishing his beer. Bob stood, too, and they walked out of Larry’s into the cool night.

A little while later, sitting in the kitchen of Daniel’s townhouse, Daniel dumped two grams of Peruvian flake onto a mirror, and began chopping the yellow-white chunks into a fine powder with a razor blade.

“So these heter-cycles —”

“Heterocyclic,” Bob corrected, watching Daniel form two long lines on the mirror.

“Heterocyclic nitrogen rings.”

“Whatever. You were playing around with these rings and stumbled across this new drug.”

“That’s right. We were using computer models of all the known alkaloids, combining them, altering them, trying new forms.

“No, thank you,” he said in response to the offer of a short plastic straw.

Daniel shrugged and bent over one line, put the straw in his nostril and sniffed long and loud, his head moving along the mirror. “Wow,” he said in a strangled voice, straightening.

He gestured again with the straw, but Bob shook his head. “Just before I got to the bar, I took a dose of Lot B.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “That’s what it’s called? Isn’t that kind of dangerous? I mean, don’t you have to get government approval before you give it to people?”

Bob snorted. “Technically, yes. But we did extensive testing on rats for six months, and no adverse effects were found. Those idiots down at the lab wanted to do six more months, and then submit the findings to the FDA.” He leaned forward, his jaw clenched. “But I know Lot B is safe. I personally ran most of the tests. I tried to tell them, but they wouldn’t listen; they insisted

on going by the book.” He leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. “So, I decided to run my own tests.”

“You ate some.”

“Exactly.”

“And your bosses don’t know.”

“Of course not. They never would have allowed it.”

Daniel got up and began pacing back and forth across the tiny kitchen floor. “Oh, man. You’re not going to flip out on me, are you? I mean, you’re not going to fall down in a fit, like swallow your tongue or something? That’s all I need, is for the cops to show up and start asking all kinds of questions.”

“I told you, there are no side-effects. It’s perfectly safe. Lot B is chemically very similar to thiamine pyrophosphate.”

“Thiamine what?”

“Vitamin B-1.”

“This killer drug is a vitamin?” Daniel crossed back to the table and picked up the straw.

“No. It’s similar to B-1. But it’s definitely not a vitamin.”

Daniel finished the second line. He stood up and pinched his nostrils together, making him sound like Donald Duck. “So what makes this Lot B so different?”

“To be honest, we really don’t know. There are certain aspects of its absorption we can’t seem to get a handle on.”

“You mean you took the stuff and you don’t know what it’s going to do to you?”

Daniel’s words were getting clipped; he was unable to stand still.

“It’s not the what we don’t know, it’s the how. We know Lot B doesn’t just affect the central nervous system like other stimulants; it accelerates nearly every process in the body. It’s a very clean high. I feel wide-awake and energetic, but not wired. Not shaky. Just very alert.”

“Man, that’s a buzz I could use. I mean, like, at work there are days when I just can’t get started. I don’t have the edge. Or I don’t have the time. Everything has to be done yesterday. I could use something to pick me up that doesn’t make me spacey.”

“Oh, this doesn’t. And coming down isn’t like any other speed. You simply get tired – and hungry. Very hungry. I remember the first time. I spent forty dollars at Denny’s —”

“This isn’t the first time you’ve taken this?”

“Tonight is my second dose.”

“Aren’t you afraid of getting hooked?”

“No. The evidence doesn’t indicate physical addiction.” The chemist got up and stretched. “Would you happen to have some paper and a pencil? I think I should record my experiences while they’re still fresh.” But Daniel had drifted, staring off into space, and didn’t hear the chemist. Abruptly, he headed for the living room. Bob shrugged and began looking in drawers for something to write on.

Daniel plopped down on the couch and turned on the TV. With his eyes wide and unblinking, he flipped through the channels using the remote like a gun, zapping each show that didn’t hold his attention, as if any would.

At some later point, Daniel became aware of a glare on the TV screen, the gray early morning light showing through the window behind the couch. He groaned and rubbed his eyes, a very unpleasant experience: his eyelids seemed to have the texture of sandpaper. His limbs were

weak and unresponsive; he didn't even have the energy to lie down. He hated feeling this burned out. Every time he came down like this, and every time he resolved not to do it again.

Bob walked in from the kitchen, not looking at all like he had been up all night. He held up a steno pad. "I'm afraid I filled it with my notes. I hope you didn't need it." Shaking his head and smacking his lips, Daniel tried to get enough moisture in his mouth to speak. Bob held up a hand. "It's all right. I'm leaving. It's only a mile or so to the bar where my car is; I'll walk. Maybe stop and get some breakfast on the way." He headed toward the front door.

"You really feel as good as you look?" Daniel asked in a raspy version of his voice.

"Yeah, I guess. A little tired and starving, but not bad. I feel a lot better than you look."

Daniel rolled his eyes. "Always forget the coming down part. Almost isn't worth it."

"Look," Bob said, "I left my number on the counter. If you want to try Lot B, I can get it for you. Call me." He opened the door and was gone.

Daniel spent the weekend trying to recover from Friday night, then Monday slammed him. The lawyer for Amanda Wilson called with several problems, Roger Kineally's people emailed a due date of Thursday for the proposal, and the auction lists for the week had many items his clients had been looking for. Putting off everything, he ate a handful of aspirin, and napped in his chair. After suffering all day, he finally made the call a little after five. Four rings and Bob answered.

"Hello?"

"Bob? It's Daniel Warren."

"Hi. What's up?"

"Well it's only Monday and I'm already two days behind. I want to try your stuff."

"Come on over. My address is 1524 Meadowlark. Can you find it?"

“Yeah. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

Daniel, bleary and slow from fatigue, stopped in front of a large older house in a once-fashionable subdivision, the streetlights winking on as the sky faded to deep purple. He knocked on the door and it opened immediately; Bob stood there, a lab coat over blue sweats. He smiled and stepped aside, closing the door behind the broker.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” he said, moving down the entry, through an archway on the right. “You want a beer?”

Daniel followed. “No, thanks. It would probably put me to sleep.” When he came in he vaguely took note of the living room, with its couch and coffee table, the requisite entertainment center holding TV, DVR, and stereo. As he followed Bob into what he recognized as the family room, however, the normalcy disappeared. One entire corner – actually half the room – was filled with computer equipment. He saw three different monitors, a stack of drives twelve high, and several things he didn’t recognize. He stopped and stared at the beeping, whirring clutter. One monitor showed a three-dimensional line drawing of a human body rotating slowly. Bob returned from the kitchen with a beer bottle in one hand. He put an arm around Daniel’s shoulders and firmly led him from the room.

“It is kind of confusing isn’t it? I’m a sucker for the newest and ‘hottest’ system. I don’t use half this stuff.” He guided Daniel to the couch and headed down the hall. “I’ll be right back.” He returned in a few moments, smiling. “You’re really going to like this.” He held out his hand.

In the chemist’s palm, Daniel saw a reddish-yellow gelatin capsule. He picked it up, holding it between two fingers.

“That’s it?”

“Yeah, that’s it. It may not look like much, but it’s got a nice kick.”

“So, what – I just swallow it?”

“Right. But first, I take a few measurements.” He took a stethoscope and a syringe out of a pocket and set them on the coffee table.

“Wait a minute. What’s this for?”

“Just some routine baseline measurements,” replied Bob. “This is still an experiment, remember.” He picked up a BP cuff and began wrapping it around Daniel’s arm. “BP, blood work, urine – nothing too elaborate.”

“I don’t know, Bob —”

The chemist’s voice hardened and he nimbly snatched back the capsule. “This is the deal. You get Lot B, I get some data. Take it or leave it.” He grinned quickly, reassuringly, but the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Too tired to really care, Daniel suffered being squeezed and poked, and peeing into a cup. When he was finished, Bob handed back the capsule and a small glass of water.

“How long does it take to hit?” Daniel asked, after emptying the glass.

“It depends on what’s in your stomach. Anywhere from ten to thirty minutes. It gets absorbed very quickly.”

“Am I okay to drive? I mean, if it hits while I’m on the road, is it okay?”

“You shouldn’t have a problem, but I would suggest leaving now. I tried to drive the first time I did it, and it took some getting used to. It wasn’t dangerous or anything; it was just... Well, you’ll find out what I mean.”

Daniel stood. “All right, then.” They shook hands, then Bob opened the door. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Yes, of course. I expect you to. Good night.”

Daniel went back to his office. He remained tense the whole way, waiting. Nothing happened while he parked his car, rode the elevator up, unlocked his office. He did notice his mind getting foggier. He sat down at his desk, daunted at the amount of work that had piled up. He was so tired he literally couldn't see straight, yet there were things that had to get done. He sat there, unable to get started, disappointed in Bob's miracle drug, and vowed never to take mind-altering substances again.

Abruptly, he was wide-awake. His heart rate increased, his vision cleared, his brain began to work again. Exhaustion sloughed away, leaving him energized, eager. In a matter of seconds, the last vestiges of his fatigue drowned in the powerful rush flooding through him.

Lot B coursed through his body like a fireball. He felt hot, light-headed, yet very clear and focused. Grinning foolishly, he attacked the mountain on his desk with a vengeance.

In four hours he had gone over all thirteen hundred pages of the Wilson deal, picked out the points that dealt with the lawyers' concerns, devised a strategy and written his counter. Then he wrote a rough draft of the Kineally proposal, as well as the instructions for his graphics producers, to be done by nine a.m. Wednesday. He also read the lists of both auctions, noting which items he would bid on and how much. The rest of the night Daniel spent reorganizing all three of his file cabinets--something he had been meaning to do for two years. He then entered all the invoices for this year, bringing his accounting up to date for the first time since starting this business. Through it all he felt great. He didn't get the shakes or space out; he didn't feel drained or bleary. He stayed awake and energetic, focused on the task at hand, heedless of the passage of time. Just as the dawn turned the street outside from black to gray, he started winding down. A great sleepiness began to creep over him, kept at bay only by the increasingly-difficult-to-ignore growling of his stomach.

Then came the most curious sensation: he felt his entire body vibrating. Unlike the shakes from other highs, it was more like a faint trembling, a minute oscillation almost too subtle to feel. Not unpleasant, nonetheless Daniel knew what it meant. Lot B was wearing off.

He reached for the phone. “Hey, Bob, listen. I need another hit.”

“Daniel?” a sleepy voice answered.

“Yeah, it’s me. Lot B was great. Everything you said it would be. But I need more.”

There was a pause at the other end. “I don’t know, Daniel. I don’t know if I can predict what the effects would be.”

“I stayed up all night catching up on my work. If I fade now, I’ll be right back where I started. I need another hit.”

“You do have a point... All right. One more.”

“Right on, Bob. Can you drop it by my office?”

“Well, I guess. I’ll be there in about twenty minutes.”

“One West Liberty. Tenth floor, Suite 1010. Thanks a lot. See you in twenty.” Daniel hung up the phone, smiling in anticipation.

A hand grabbed his shoulder and shook him. He started and nearly fell backward out of his chair. Blinking, he looked up at Bob’s round face.

“Man, that was fast,” he said, yawning.

“You were asleep. It’s actually been almost thirty minutes since I talked to you.”

“No way —” He glanced at his watch and stopped. “That’s too weird. I don’t even remember nodding off.”

“Here.” Bob set a large plastic tumbler on the desk and popped the lid off. “Drink this.” Daniel picked up the full glass and eyed the dark brown liquid suspiciously. “It’s one of those

protein drinks athletes use. If you insist on taking Lot B like this, you're going to have to get some kind of nutrition in you."

"No way. This stuff is terrible. Chocolate sand. I'll get something later."

Bob's face turned to stone. "If you want another dose," he said slowly, "You'll drink this." Too stunned to argue, Daniel gulped down the thick drink. Over the glass he re-appraised the pudgy chemist. What did he really know about this guy? He noticed again the icy blue eyes, and wondered if should be doing this. Then Bob smiled again and handed him a small prescription bottle. Inside were four gelatin capsules. Doubts about Bob dissolved like a mist. In a softer tone Bob said, "I figured this way you wouldn't be calling me every twelve hours. Be careful. You're getting into areas that are unknown, even to me. Don't overdo it." He walked to the door and was gone. Daniel promised himself to go slow, to use a little caution.

He did take it slow, at first. The rest of the week passed in a routine of taking TJ—or Turbo Juice, as he started calling it—in the morning, working like mad all day, stopping at a fast food place for seven or eight burgers and fries, then going home and crashing. He got more done in one week than in the previous four months. And yet, there always seemed to be more work. The word spread like fire on the grapevine; Daniel Warren was the man to find what you wanted. For every deal he closed, there were two others right behind it. By Friday night, he had more work than he could handle and faced the prospect of a working weekend without TJ.

He showed up at Bob's door as the buzz faded with the afternoon light, the now-familiar internal vibrations making him feel insubstantial. He knocked, and the porch light came on; a moment later the door opened.

"Daniel," Bob said, letting the broker in. "I am glad to see you."

"I need to get more TJ." He came in and plopped down on the couch.

“TJ?”

“Yeah. That’s what I call Lot B. Turbo Juice.” Daniel chuckled. “It sure does take you off.”

“That’s nice. First, though, we’ll just run our tests.” A few minutes later Bob finished; he sat down on the couch and looked closely at Daniel. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were getting addicted.”

“Naw, I’m not hooked, man,” Daniel replied, yawning. “But I am swamped. This has been a great week. And if I can get some work done this weekend, next week will be even better.” Bob still hesitated. “Look. I’ve been eating and getting sleep. I only eat TJ in the mornings. But I’ve still got a lot of work to do, and I’m starting to fade. I’ll even pay you, if that’s what you want.”

“No, no. That isn’t necessary. I’m —”

Daniel got his wallet and pulled out some cash. “It’s no problem, Bob. I’ve got plenty. Hell, I’ve made more money this week than I ever have.”

“No,” the chemist retorted, the hard look flashing across his face. “It’s not about money. This is beyond what I know.”

“I’m all right, man. No side effects. No fits or hallucinations, no rashes, no body parts falling off. I’m cool.”

Bob’s eyes narrowed and something Daniel couldn’t place crossed the chemist’s face. He seemed to come to a decision. “Fine then. Whatever you say. I’ll be right back.” He went down the hall returned with another prescription bottle and handed it over. It was full of capsules.

“There’s enough here to last the weekend and all of next week.”

Beaming, Daniel popped off the cap and tossed a capsule into his mouth. “Right on, Bob. This will definitely hit the spot.”

“Don’t you want something to wash that down with?”

“Hunh-uh. I let them dissolve in my mouth. They hit faster.” He headed for the door. “Thanks, man.”

By Thursday Daniel was out again. He hadn’t slept since Sunday night, hadn’t eaten anything since Tuesday morning--the last time he had actually come down. Bob gave him another full bottle. Then another on Monday. Daniel had taken to popping two or three TJs at a time; one just wasn’t doing it anymore. He only vaguely noticed that except for his insistence on doing the tests, Bob was very quiet, making virtually no comments about the doses Daniel was taking. He just kept supplying the drug.

In some remote part of his mind, Daniel realized he had lost control. He was vaguely aware the path he traveled ended in darkness; he just couldn’t do anything about it.

No, not exactly. He wouldn’t do anything about it. Beyond the clean high that allowed him to work so efficiently and maniacally, TJ also gave him a feeling of command; at times he felt almost omnipotent. He was always two steps ahead of those around him, enabling him to close nearly every deal. He answered questions before they were asked, dispelled doubts before they were realized. The feeling of superiority overwhelmed him, and soon the thought of not being juiced rarely entered his mind.

Even coming down -- on those rare occasions when his common sense got the better of him and he stopped long enough to eat and sleep -- held a pleasure all its own. He called the faint oscillations in his body and the feeling of lightness the “echoes.” They were, in their own way, nearly as pleasurable as getting high. They signaled the end of a high, and time to take another

hit. So, by positive reinforcement, Daniel came to look forward to the echoes, knowing that shortly he would be high again.

The weeks went by, and Daniel grew less and less aware of the passage of time. He began to ignore his business. He didn't return clients' phone calls, he missed meetings. He took to wandering the streets at night, hanging out with the bums and grifters, hustling the hustlers. Days he spent in darkened video arcades, kids gathered wide-eyed as he beat every machine in the city. He wandered aimlessly, simply looking for something to do while he was high.

Everything became just something to do while he was high.

The only thing meaningful in his life was visiting the house in the suburbs. He showed up every third or fourth night, endured Bob's tests, got his bottle and left.

And then, tonight, the ride had suddenly come to an end. Daniel had shown up at the house as usual, although he was barely conscious of driving over. When Bob opened the door, however, it felt different. The sweat on the chemist's forehead, the flushed skin: Bob's attempt to hide something didn't fool Daniel for a second. Instantly wary, adrenaline added to his buzz.

Bob was grave as he ushered him in. "It's over, Daniel. I'm stopping this right now."

"What do you mean?" In Daniel's voice menace crouched.

"I mean it's over. No more Lot B. It's destroying you."

"No, it's not."

Bob exploded. "Have you looked in the mirror lately? You look dead. You've lost forty pounds in six weeks, your blood pressure is dangerously high, and you're on the verge of a total renal failure. You'll kill yourself if you don't stop." Daniel smiled an ugly little smile that bared all his teeth. Bob went on, oblivious. "I'm cutting you off. No more Lot B. I can't afford to have you show dead somewhere and it get back to me."

Daniel pulled the gun from where he had stuffed it in his pants in the small of his back. He couldn't remember where he had gotten it, whether he had bought it or stolen it. It didn't matter. The weight felt good in his hand; it felt good to point it at Bob. Bob was speechless, his eyes wide. He started to move away, but Daniel shifted the pistol, freezing the chemist. "Listen very carefully. You are going to continue to give me all the TJ I want. Whenever I want." He turned and headed down the hall toward the bedroom where Bob had always gone to get his little bottle.

Bob followed, finding his voice. "Wait. Don't go in there —"

Daniel opened the door and stopped. He wasn't sure what he expected to find, but it certainly wasn't the scene that greeted him.

The room was a lab. Racks and shelves lined the walls, and a portable sink stood in the middle. Bunsen burners and a centrifuge sat amid a profusion of beakers and tubing. He saw jars and jars of chemicals, some open on the tables, most stacked on the floor against a wall.

Bob slipped past Daniel and faced him, his arms outstretched protectively, his eyes wild, reckless. "That's right. I've been making the stuff right here the whole time. When they shut down the project at the lab, I moved all the equipment here. I had to continue the work." Some small part of Daniel retained enough sanity to be afraid. Bob had been lying to him from the start. Lot B wasn't a drug they were testing, waiting for FDA approval; it was a creation of one twisted individual whose compassion had been a pretense, a means to his end. "Yes," Bob screeched, emboldened by the hesitation in Daniel's eyes. "You've been my guinea pig all along. I needed the data. I control Lot B! If I say you don't get anymore, you don't get anymore."

A greater terror gripped Daniel. Born of need, the craving drove him to desperation. He had to have TJ. Not getting it was not an option. A faint ringing in his ears sounded, signaling the

beginning of the echoes. He began to search the room, holding Bob at bay with the gun. He looked in jars, behind equipment. He knew Bob; he knew the chemist had a stash somewhere.

Bob's eyes betrayed him.

Daniel caught the glance at a cardboard shoebox on the floor near the door. Still pointing the gun at Bob, he opened the box. Inside were several empty bottles and a plastic bag full of red-gold gelatin capsules. Grinning, eyes glittering, he hefted the plastic bag in his free hand.

"Daniel." Bob's voice had turned soothing, but Daniel could hear the edge of panic. "There's something else I have to tell you. I've been holding some things back —"

"Oh, really? What a surprise. But I'm willing to forgive and forget, as long as you keep making TJ."

"You don't understand!" Bob barked. "The effect takes some time to manifest, but when it does, it comes on suddenly and irrevocably. Death is guaranteed." Daniel scoffed and backed out of the room; the other man following closely. "Listen to me! After you've taken a certain amount of Lot B, some sort of critical mass point is reached. The chain reaction begins breaking down the chemical bonds in your body. It's irreversible. If you keep taking doses, you'll reach it soon. Don't you understand? My analysis shows you're almost at that point. The next time you take Lot B, it could kill you!"

Daniel had backed out to the entryway, only half-listening to Bob's ramblings. The ringing in his ears made it hard to concentrate, but he knew one thing: Bob didn't want him to get high anymore. And that couldn't happen. Nobody was going to keep him from getting high.

While he was trying to figure out a way to keep the gun on Bob, hold the bag, and open the front door, Bob lunged.

The gun banged once, twice. Daniel wondered at how such a small pistol could make such a loud sound. The first bullet hit Bob in the center of the chest and exited near the collarbone, lodging in the ceiling. Blood sprayed Daniel and one wall of the entryway. The second bullet struck Bob's abdomen next to his belly button and didn't exit. The chemist spun and crashed to the floor face up, dark arterial blood quickly beginning to cover the tile. His eyes stared up at nothing, the pupils dilating.

Daniel watched the whole scene with a surreal clarity. He stood over the body, the gun still smoking in his hand, blood lapping at his shoes, and tried to feel something. He couldn't. It wasn't real. The only thing that was real was the plastic bag he held in his other hand. He opened the front door and walked away without looking back, leaving a trail of dark footprints on the concrete.

In his car, he opened the bag and took a handful of capsules out. He popped them into his mouth, one after the other, and drove off. By the time he got back to his office, he knew something was wrong. He was awake, but the oscillations in his body were growing more intense by the minute. Instead of going away as TJ kicked in, the echoes grew stronger. He sat at his desk and took another handful. He wondered how he had come to his place, how he had come to be this person. What he had become?

The echoes got worse. He had no weight at all, seemingly made of light and air. If he could only concentrate hard enough, he could float right up out of his chair. He could feel his molecules, the stuff of his body, moving, vibrating, dancing a mysterious dance. It was a joyous dance, the random kinetic movement of atoms being true to their nature. At once terrified and awestruck, Daniel whimpered and rejoiced, prayed and worshipped.

His fingers began to dissolve. They blurred, as if the flesh had lost its focus, then they were gone. He watched the disintegration spread to his hands, his arms. His vision began to fail as his body spontaneously disincorporated. The world resolved to black and white ants moving frantically about, like the snow on TV. He felt no fear now. Only the exquisite sensation of release – ultimate, final release.

In the morning, the sun sent a bright shaft into an empty office, the light scattering golden off the unusually thick cloud of motes that hung in the air.