

DRUGS DON'T KILL PEOPLE

By Arni Fannar

Hallucinations were a positive sign, though they usually didn't feel that way. Once your blood had become so contaminated with the substance that your senses started to break down, you were practically *untouchable*. And there was no need to run anymore. That would be excessive. Though your visions might convince you otherwise. They could terrify you, embodying your real fears and anxieties, drawing on reality the same way as your nightmares did. But in essence they were comforting, symbolising only that you were safe. It was the paradox of Survival.

Alexander Barnes had managed to train his first batch of the white powder that he simply called Survival for more than two weeks, and it had kept him safe. The monster wasn't drawn to intoxicated blood, and was possibly even repelled by it. Hence to ingest the substance was a survival instinct. It was also the only known way to escape from the menace – though *known* only by few. But once the effects had worn off, gradually your blood became clean again. And then you were back to being exposed. The Doctor was working on developing a toxin that would stay in your bloodstream indefinitely, like a heavy metal; like mercury. But until a protective charm like that had been made available the hassle would go on, and Alexander had to stack up on the substance he had access to.

Getting his hands on more supplies was becoming increasingly urgent – not just as he was running out, but also out of the awareness that the advantage of his knowledge wasn't everlasting. The more people knew, the harder it would be to get a fix. He had to hope that this new dealer hadn't yet discovered the protective properties of the white powder against the monster, as otherwise it would affect the price, or even terminate the sale entirely. Once the barons knew, they would surely only want to keep their supplies to themselves. The time would come when the only way to get more would be to fight someone for it. You would even have to fight off other users just to hold on to your own doses, as they would always prefer to take on one of their own rather than face the monster. As long as this new dealer was still oblivious to the importance of the substance against the monster, Alexander should try to clean him out – buy off him all his supplies – leaving him helpless against the fiend. In that case it could even be safe for Alexander to go into debt with the dealer for what was left that he couldn't afford, as the dealer probably wouldn't live long enough to come after him to collect it.

Alexander had been off Survival for almost twelve hours now, and while he was feeling uneasy about it he was also aware of how important it was for

him to remain clear-minded and composed as he planned out the next steps, counting his money and making arrangements. He had sobered up for his trip to the bank, where he had managed to withdraw all of his savings without arousing the kind of suspicions that would get him into trouble. People might raise issues with you if you came off too much like an addict in their presence. But then that hadn't really been a problem in Alexander's case, as he wasn't an addict. His only withdrawal symptom was *fear* – reasonable concerns over the consequences of him permanently drying up. Was the cash that he had gotten from the bank even going to be enough to cover all he needed? Shouldn't he try to sell some of his possessions as well, before meeting up with the dealer? Alexander needed to decide whether it would be worth it for him to spend time on that.

He only had one item at home that he could see making a quick sale: his most prized one, the Rolex. It should be worth at least fifteen-hundred. He could even try bringing it directly to the dealer, exchanging it for more of the white powder without going through the trouble of liquidizing it first. He could simply add it to the four-thousand in bank notes that he had withdrawn from the bank. All in all it should get him about three-hundred grams of the white powder. But then he shouldn't spend it all; Alexander would need to have money left for food. If he made it into the post-apocalyptic world that the monster would leave behind it, he would need to have some money left to get by on. However, at that stage there would surely be plenty of it lying around, left there by those who hadn't made it. Nothing to rejoice over, of course, however the prospect would enable Alexander to spend all his money now, with the knowledge that he should have easy access to more later on. The same went for food, as there would be no one guarding the belongings of the slaughtered grocery store owner. The most important asset to have for the time being was the white powder. Even the wads of bank notes in front of Alexander didn't entice him anymore. Their only value lay in acquiring more Survival.

There was perhaps one other value in all his money, and that was the memories that it sparked: memories of how he had made it, working for it, putting it aside; the plans he had made for it. At the point in Alexander's life when his main goal had been to make as much money as he could, holding multiple jobs at a time, only then had he been thinking clearly. He'd had the right idea, though unfortunately he had ended up squandering a lot of what he had made. Extravagant items that he bought for himself – such as the Rolex watch – had resale value, which was their redeeming feature. But all that Alexander had spent on life experiences was wasted. Then there had been that unfortunate time when he was off the job market completely, to study at university. He had gotten derailed from the ever-important task of accumulating wealth that he would one day need to exchange for the substance that would save his life. Even back then Alexander had been aware of the emptiness of it all – the delusion behind this practice of incessantly reading and memorising, all for the sake of constructing a kind of a childish fantasy around yourself that this way you were merely waiting out the period in your life when you were poor and undiscovered; that one day someone of influence would come knocking at your door, seeking out your talent and offering you the position of a lifetime – all because of how well you did at university. Alexander's only saving grace back then was that he never became devoted enough to finish his studies, and ended up leaving uni without a degree. He went straight back to work, and with that he was back on the right track, back to saving up for rainy days – still, without any idea of just what kind of rainy *times* there were ahead of him.

When he had purchased the Rolex he certainly hadn't imagined himself having to sell it later in order to stay alive. Back then it had simply been a status symbol – and an important one: from the reaction that he got from others when he flashed his watch at them, Alexander became able to separate the ones who were likeminded to him from the rest of the crowd. He could see which ones *understood* and appreciated the importance of material wealth as he did, and

then which ones were oblivious to it. People who were indifferent to his Rolex watch weren't worth his time. But then there were those who *really* cared, like that special someone – the girl who had even let Alexander get into her pants after she had seen that watch on him. He secretly referred to her as his *Rolex-wife*, though without any judgement; on the contrary, he had great respect for the girl's appreciation for his apparent wealth at the time, even though it *had* turned out to be a deception on his part. She had gone with him after having deduced from his Rolex that he was worth her time. It had gotten her into bed with him, but then she had quickly discovered that Alexander wasn't as rich as his watch had let off. In fact she refused to go steady with him. However, she didn't mind making a habit of sleeping with him. That one time had been enough for her to acquire a taste for it. She liked his dick, or perhaps she was just eager to recreate the experience of that first night, that time that she had *believed* that she had bagged someone truly wealthy. Perhaps that had been a bliss for her that she was trying to hold on to.

Their affair went on for a couple of months. But eventually Alexander's Rolex-wife left him. The fire had gone out. Presumably the memory of that first time had become too distant, replaced with less exhilarating associations. Alexander wouldn't be able to find another one like her, no matter how often he tried flashing his Rolex at women. She had been special. It was as if she alone appreciated the true value of his watch. Now the Rolex served as a souvenir of what they'd had. It still reminded Alexander of her – reminded him of the sight of her bare breasts and pubic hairs on that first night that they slept together, and of her smell, as she had been wet *silly* with excitement that first time. But now the watch had to go. It needed to be traded for what was truly important: Survival. Alexander had no regrets over it; by using the watch as currency in this time of need, he was merely honouring their mutual understanding of the importance of that asset, as one day it could end up saving your life.

Alexander wouldn't spend all his money right away – he decided. Instead he would put away one-thousand and bring three-thousand and the Rolex watch to the dealer. He would still attempt to *push* the dealer for three-hundred grams of Survival. In times like these you found yourself capable of feats that you would never have attempted before – even hustling a drug-dealer. Their meeting was already set up, out in the street at night. The circumstances were far from ideal, with the monster being on the loose, and then Alexander wouldn't even get any dope from the dealer on that first meeting. He wouldn't bring with him the money or the watch. All Alexander intended to do that night was to inform the dealer of the larger quantity that he wanted to get from him later. It was a risky strategy, not least as this way Alexander would be prolonging his sobriety, while he could easily purchase a smaller stash off the dealer on their first meeting, which could then last him up until the big score. But Alexander felt stubborn enough to stick to his original idea: of holding on, in order to make sure that he got the *full* quantity that he needed. With three-hundred grams he should be set for the next couple of months. That way he could hibernate. And so, he shouldn't settle for anything less than the big batch, even if it meant going unprotected against the monster for a few more days.

The monster had already appeared in Alexander's area. That was where it had struck the first time, leaving behind it a trail of four bodies, all in the same flat. But there had also been one survivor – one partial witness to the attack, yet no one believed the man's testimony. Instead he was arrested for the murder of the other four. The case was considered to be as good as closed, even if the only evidence against the man was that he had been intoxicated at the time. That was considered to be grounds and motive enough for the man to brutally murder his friends. And so, the dope was blamed for everything. No one realised that, contrary to what the authorities assumed, the substance that the man had in his blood was the only reason he was alive. It had saved him, protecting him against the attacker. The monster wouldn't touch him while his blood was

contaminated. The pattern seemed all too obvious to Alexander, as he had been informed already of the presence of the monster, and that the only way to keep it away from yourself was to get enough of the substance into your system. Alexander had been told about the Doctor who had made this discovery and was now working on new ways of repelling the monster without constant intake of the good substance.

Even so, Alexander had been reluctant to snort in the white powder at first. It wasn't until he heard of the second attack that he was able to bring himself to go through with it. This time a couple had been killed by the monster out in the street. There were rumours about the state of the corpses when they were discovered, as indicating a *ritualistic* murder. But Alexander knew that it couldn't be true, as that wasn't how the monster operated. Again there was a witness to the attack, someone who had narrowly escaped getting killed himself, by what he described as a supernatural being, though the full details from that description hadn't been made public. Instead the man's testimony was dismissed on the basis that, much like the previous one, he had been highly intoxicated at the time. But this little detail didn't fit the picture to Alexander; it seemed obvious that if the monster *had* tried to attack the man, then his blood couldn't have had any drugs in it. The official reports simply weren't reliable. All they were focused on was creating a *scare* – that now there was a type of drug in circulation that could turn normal people into cold-blooded killers. It was completely counterproductive, as it would only serve to aid the monster. Alexander had to rely only on his own impulses, and they now enabled him to take in the drug. A wave of tranquillity came over him with the feeling that went through his whole body, that he had now become safe from the monster. Alexander later became convinced that exactly that night the drug had saved his life, as if the monster had been near. It had been a turning point for Alexander, and from then on he made sure to always keep some of the good substance in his blood.

Alexander didn't know what the man would look like – the dealer whom he had only spoken to over the phone. But that didn't turn out to be a problem, as there was only a single, solitary individual standing out in the dark alley where they had agreed to meet. There was no one else around. It was as if people had become too afraid to go outside; as if they knew about the monster already, and didn't trust that those who had been arrested were really the ones responsible for the recent murders. No, people could come to the logical conclusion themselves, as long as their lives were at stake. But if the monster showed up in the alley that night, it would only have the two of them to choose from. And maybe the dealer even had some dope in his blood that would protect him – although it didn't look like he could even afford it. For someone who supposedly was making a living from selling drugs, the man looked surprisingly poor, not least from his jacket: a filthy, puffed-up garment that he could have gotten from the Salvation Army. A cloud of doubt passed over Alexander, and he began to wonder whether he was being set up with this meeting, and if the new dealer was just out to rob him.

“I didn't bring any money,” Alexander said straight away.

He could tell that this didn't bode well with the dealer. The man's facial expression became that of a gargoyle, with how the his whole face was pulled by the wrinkling up of the muscle in between the eyes – eyes that looked manic; as if they were about to swallow Alexander. There was no doubt that this man was on *something*, and so the dealer would be safe from the monster if it appeared there that night.

“*What?*” the dealer hissed back at Alexander. “You dragged me out here for *nothing?*”

Alexander had to remind himself of how he had planned to keep his cool, in an attempt to gain the upper hand on the dealer, to *squeeze* out of him a bigger quantity of the substance than the dealer would otherwise be ready to give him, for the amount that Alexander could offer.

“Not *nothing*,” Alexander said. “Calm down; I’m here to make an order. I need something quite big: three-hundred grams of cocaine. Nothing less.”

“What the fuck?” The dealer took a step back, but it still came off as a gesture of intimidation, as if he were merely stepping away from Alexander to then charge at him. The dealer went on frowning with irritation. “What *the fuck* made you think that *I* would have three-hundred grams?”

It dawned on Alexander that he was way in over his head.

“You have *access*, don’t you?” he managed to mumble clearly enough.

“But that’s not for everyone,” said the dealer. “Not random strangers.”

“I’m good for it.”

“It’s not just about money.” The dealer shook his head. “I would need to *trust* you, and I don’t.”

With that, he turned away from Alexander and started to walk away. The idea to jump the man for what little of Survival he had on him crossed Alexander’s mind, but instead he called to the dealer’s back.

“*Come on*; is there no way we can do this?”

The dealer turned back to face Alexander.

“You are walking away from an awful lot of money,” Alexander insisted, before the dealer had managed to give a response.

“But I don’t *have* what you want,” the dealer said coolly. He was now less agitated than before, more at ease, more on top of things.

“Couldn’t you get it, though?”

“Possibly. But it would take time. And, like I said, I don’t know you – so there’s that risk.”

Something in the ease at which the dealer was now addressing Alexander didn't exactly indicate that he seriously considered it a possibility that Alexander was working for the police, yet it seemed reasonable for the dealer to show that kind of concern. Alexander, on the other hand, was growing anxious.

"But you're in this business to *sell*, aren't you?" Alexander tried to reason with him.

"To sell, *and* not get caught – would be more like my motto."

"This is silly," Alexander tried. "I need three-hundred grams, *ASAP*. I can pay you three-thousand dollars for it, and a Rolex watch that's worth two-thousand-five-hundred, at least."

The dealer seemed to be amused by this, in a bitter sort of way. He stuffed his hands in the pocket of his cheap jacket.

"First of all: *no*. It's got to be *cash*. All of it. No stolen stuff. And no watches that could be fake."

He summoned a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, and then he inserted one in between his lips, with the ease of a magician performing a sleight of hand, as if he had just summoned the cigarette out from behind his ear. He didn't offer one to Alexander.

"There is someone else, isn't there?" Alexander went on. "Someone who *would* maybe be able to tell that the Rolex *isn't* a fake?" He was out on a limb. "I mean, you said that *you* didn't have the three-hundred grams, right? So, supposedly there must be someone else that you would get it from?"

The dealer fired up the cigarette with a lighter.

"You seem to think that you know a lot about me," he said, while keeping the cigarette firmly locked between his teeth.

"Look at *us*, man; we're pawns," said Alexander, reflecting on the man's cheap-looking outfit, and then he had suddenly remembered the cover-story that he had worked out before this meeting. "We're doing this for someone else,

aren't we? Both of us. I don't need three-hundred grams for *myself*. I'm getting it for this other guy."

The dealer pensively blew smoke into the air.

"Well, at least I know that you are not a *narc*," he reflected. "Making such a stupid offer, with the watch and all – but even so, if you get caught, you know, going around with your three-hundred grams, *I* could end up in deep shit."

"But I'm not holding on to it. I'm passing the stuff on as soon as I can."

The dealer fished a mobile phone out of his jacket.

"Stay there," he said to Alexander, as he took a few steps away from him, to then turn in the other direction and make the phone call with his back turned to Alexander.

Alexander stayed still, but concentrated on hearing what the dealer said into the phone. He only caught a few muffled up words: "*Got this guy here... Three-hundred... Wants to pay with a fucking Rolex. What do you make of it?*"

Alexander got slightly startled as the dealer turned to him without taking the phone away from his face.

"Do you *only* have three grand – in dough?" he asked.

"No, I suppose I can get... five-hundred more."

The dealer turned away from Alexander and went on into the phone. "OK, thirty-five hundred."

Alexander couldn't catch anything else that the dealer said. His own desperation had become too distracting. After what seemed like eternity – though it might only have been a few seconds – the dealer took down the phone and turned around.

"Five-fifteen tomorrow, p.m." the dealer said authoritatively. "*You* show up like tonight, but at a different road. I'll text it to you and you be there *on* the minute, *with* the money *and* the watch, or the deal is off."

Alexander heaved a sigh of relief.

“At what time are you going to send me the address? Be aware that it might take me time to get there.”

“An hour in advance,” said the dealer. He turned and left Alexander there.

Once he was back in his flat, Alexander had started to tremble. He couldn't keep his hands steady as he closed the front door behind him. The bravado that he had showed in the face of the dealer hadn't sufficed to put his mind at ease towards the situation he was. How long could he go on without Survival? It wouldn't have to be too long, he told himself, as his next meeting with the dealer was already set up for the following day. And with that he would have the ultimate quantity of the white powder, enough for him to go on for weeks. Another day, another dealer; this time someone who possibly had the same appreciation for Rolex watches as Alexander did.

As Alexander hadn't even been informed *where* he would be meeting the two dealers, it was impossible for him to picture and plan out his interaction with them. The only way for him to possibly calm his nerves was if he were able to imagine and outline exactly *how* he was going to act and what he would say, but now he couldn't. He had no idea of how he would have to work with the second dealer. In the end, the only part of the next day that Alexander *was* able to imagine was the time when he would be back home with his three-hundred grams. There was one procedure that he planned to go through before he would ingest any of it: he was going to prepare an emergency shot to keep on himself – Survival deluded in water, in a syringe. That way, if he ever found himself in a situation where he needed to get more of the substance into his blood, quickly, he could inject himself with it. It should be more effective than snorting it in, yet Alexander would only keep it for an emergency.

He lay awake in bed. Sleep didn't come to him easily. The walls surrounding him wouldn't do to keep the monster out. Its first round of victim had been killed inside a flat just like this one. A novice might assume that locking oneself up inside would suffice as protection – but then Alexander had

ended up just as exposed as anyone else. *You had the answer and still you let yourself be eaten*, he told himself.

The next morning Alexander had nothing to do with his time other than to prepare the money for the delivery, as he would bring it to the dealers: in an old duffel bag. He took his time aligning the money inside the walls of the bag. As it stood, he could only leave five-hundred at home, which would have to be enough to cover all his other needs in the upcoming weeks.

Between the hours of three and four Alexander was checking his mobile phone every two minutes, for the text message to come from the dealer. Until he had that he had absolutely nothing, and all of his money was useless.

He was looking at the phone in his hand as the message finally arrived. The impression that it immediately made on him was like a prelude to the feeling that he got from snorting the Survival. And then, as he read the address that feeling became intensified. Now he knew which road it would be. All he needed to do was to find the quickest way to get there by bus.

The ride on the bus dragged on. The wait at the bus stop had been frustrating enough, but while on the bus, every time that it stopped Alexander felt his heart sinking at the thought that *this time* the bus wouldn't take off again. He got off the bus at the right stop, where he needed only to cross a couple of roads to get to the spot that was indicated in the message. There was rain, light showers, yet the weather didn't bother Alexander – though he checked to make sure that his bag was sealed tight, so that the money inside it wouldn't get wet. He got to the meeting place ten minutes ahead of time. It was by a road in an industrial area, mostly of car sales. As he waited there, the feeling in the pit of Alexander's stomach made him imagine that his organs were *orbiting* around themselves – or at least that one of them had started and the rest had then been pulled along

as an attachment, into one big bundle of organs that would end up dragging even Alexander's brain down into the collection. And then the dealer would find only a mummy standing in that spot when he arrived, with the eyes gone out of the sockets.

Yet the dealer beat Alexander's internal self-mummification to the scene. Alexander saw him standing at a distance, waving and signalling him to come over. What struck Alexander right away was that the dealer was by himself and furthermore didn't seem to be carrying anything more on him than before. Alexander intended to bring it up, demanding an explanation, once he had reached the dealer. Alexander *had*, in the end, fulfilled his own part of the agreement by bringing his money along. He held on to his rage over the matter as he hurried over there; he wasn't about put up with any more attitude from the dealer. But the dealer didn't wait for Alexander to get to him. He had started walking in the opposite direction. Presumably he was going to where the transaction would take place, and as it turned out that wasn't going to be out there in the street, where passerbyers could see them. There was hope for Alexander that the man was taking him to the *real* dealer – the *real deal*. That one would look more like a *champion* than dealer#1. He wouldn't be wearing such awful clothes. It would be someone who *had* become rich from dealing drugs – and appreciated Role watches.

As Alexander caught up with the dealer it didn't even occur to him to ask about the missing stash anymore, as it seemed evident that the dealer was leading him to it. So the two of them walked on in silence. The dealer went up to a house where he opened the door, and then kept it open for Alexander, who stepped inside. They had entered a mechanic's garage. It was dingy, dirty and disorganised. There was only one car in there, though there was space enough for two or three more. The equipment was scattered around everywhere.

A man emerged from the back. He looked neither particularly like a mechanic nor the successful drug baron that Alexander had imagined earlier.

Alexander put the man in his late forties, white and skinny, with long, dark hair, and a moustache that ran down to the bottom of his chin and would no doubt be impeding for the practice of snorting coke. He wore a camouflage jacket that *could* have been out of The Salvation Army.

The man bobbed his head, as if in rhythm to some imagined music. He put out his hand.

“Let’s see the watch,” he said, and then he coughed from the effort of speaking.

Alexander fished the Rolex out of the side pocket of his duffel bag and placed it in the man’s palm. The man remained standing there, looking at the watch and frowning. He checked his own wrist watch for comparison. He then put the Rolex up to his ears. He wandered to the back, where he sat down at a cluttered desk, still facing Alexander. The moustache-man took out a magnifying glass from a drawer. He went on examining the watch through it. Throughout this procedure he didn’t utter a word. Eventually he rose up from the desk, causally holding Alexander’s most prized possession in his hand. He walked back to Alexander.

“And you have also the money?” he asked.

“It’s in my bag.” Alexander patted the duffel bag. He turned a small opening of the bag so that the man got a glimpse of the cash inside.

“Can we count it?” asked the man with the moustache. It was time for Alexander to have his say. He started by shaking his head.

“The money that *I* have, together with the watch in your hand, is for three-hundred grams of cocaine. You show that to me first and then we count the money.”

The man nodded.

“Fair enough.”

He went back behind the desk. This time he took out an old baking scale with weights. He then took out something that looked like a lime-green brick. It

was a block of the substance wrapped in green plastic. The man opened a slid in the package and Alexander could now see the white powder clearly. He felt his stomach turn agitated at the sight. The dealer then took out a small, golden carton that he placed next to the package, and then, with a pocket knife, edged a miniscule quantity of the substance onto the carton. He lifted the carton up for Alexander to come closer and take it.

“Try it.”

Alexander made his way up to the outreached hand and took the carton out of it. He felt reluctant to try the coke – less so out of mistrust for the dealer than for concerns that the feeling of finally getting more Survival into his system would be overpowering. Alexander might even break down and begin to cry. He licked the index finger of his free hand and then wiped the golden surface clean with it. He put the finger into his mouth. The taste was *genuine*; this was the real thing. Alexander felt himself getting teary-eyed. It was beautiful. He would happily leave all the money with these nice men, just as long as the quantity was right.

“Satisfied?” asked the dealer behind the counter.

Alexander could only nod in agreement.

The man reclosed the package and placed it on the scale.

“Look at that: three-hundred.” The dealer lifted the merchandise up from the scale and watched the base go back up. “And *zero*,” he said, as if to prove that the scale had not been tempered with. It seemed reliable, even though Alexander hadn’t taken in the number on the scale while the package was on it. He was getting to eager to be out of there with his white powder.

“Just give it to me and I’ll be gone.”

The man looked up and smiled. “We still need to count *your* money.”

“Why, of course,” Alexander responded, though he had completely forgotten.

The first dealer came up to Alexander and reached for the bag.

“I can’t leave the bag with you though, as I’ll need it to keep the... the product in it.”

The first dealer dropped the duffel bag in the lap of the one behind the counter, who then fished out each wad of money, and ran his fingers through them in varied ways. The cash then disappeared behind the counter. Once the bag was empty, the mechanic dropped the green package inside it.

On his way back, Alexander was feeling as afraid as ever. He wasn’t yet in the clear, even if he had now gotten much closer to success. The quantity that he had put in his mouth at the mechanic’s might not have been enough to keep the monster away. Then, once he got home, he still had to prepare the emergency shot of Survival to keep on himself, before he would celebrate, so that he could shoot himself up if he ever ended up sober in a situation where he needed more of the substance.

As soon as he was back home, Alexander went straight to work on preparing his emergency shot. Even though he had never done it before, he knew exactly how to go about it, from information that he had gathered – of how to mix the cocaine with water and then get it into the syringe.

The massive quantity of Survival in that green package seemed surreal. Alexander opened it on the kitchen table and let it stand there. He took a pinch out of the pile and put it onto a plate. He then proceeded to prepare the syringe. Once the boost was ready Alexander placed the syringe back in its package, so that he could safely keep it inside his jacket without risk of getting pierced. He would also need a string of some sorts to squeeze his arm with and summon the vein before the injection. For that he took out an unused shoelace that he had in the wardrobe.

And with that everything was ready.

A job well done.

Alexander took another pinch from the pile of Survival on the kitchen table.

“Here’s to Survival.”

He brought it up his nose and breathed it in.

Alexander woke up in bed, with his insides rebelling. He had to get up fast. It would take him a great deal of effort just to get to the bathroom without barfing all over the floor on his way. And yet he made it, eventually plunging his head into the toilet bowl before the vomit came flowing out of his mouth. Then he collapsed on the floor, and stayed lying there, reflecting: he had known that a thing like this could happen if he wasn’t careful with the substance, but this had been a delayed effect from his intake of the day before, and it had nearly happened to him while he was asleep. Throwing up while you were sleeping could be fatal; you could suffocate from it. Alexander felt furious at the revelation. He was taken by an urge to spring back to his feet, just to trash something around him and that way get an outlet for his sudden rage. Once he was up he grabbed the item nearest to him – a spray for cleaning the bathroom mirror – and hurled it out into the corridor. Then he grabbed a bar of soap from the sink and sent it smashing against the wall. That had felt good. And there was no harm in it; Alexander could turn the whole apartment upside down and it wouldn’t matter. He would feel comfortable in his own mess.

Alexander went to the kitchen and saw on the clock on the wall that the time was four-fifteen pm. He had turned his day around, sleeping during daytime and staying up at night. He opened the refrigerator and looked upon the collection of ready-made meals that he had hoarded the day before. He wouldn’t need to leave this apartment for a while. He turned his attention to the pile of Survival, where it was splayed in its wrappings on the kitchen table. It wouldn’t do to leave it there: if Alexander opened a window, and a gust of wind came in, that could send the white powder flying all over his kitchen. The logical place to

put it instead seemed to be the container where he usually kept flour. That would be a fitting *hiding place* – for a hiding place it truly was, as it wasn't merely for protecting his stash from the wind, but also from people who might come over there.

Alexander ransacked the kitchen cupboard before he had the flour container in his hands. A powdered cloud rose up into the air as he emptied the container into the sink. He rinsed the container and dried it, leaving a swamp of wheat and water in the sink. He then made the transfer, carefully lifting up the wrappings with the cocaine and then pouring it into the container. He noticed how wasteful the transportation had been, with all the residues that it had left on the plastic wrappings. Alexander brought the plastic up to his nose and tried to breathe the powder in from it. It didn't feel effective. Eventually Alexander gave up and licked all the powder off it instead.

All for the monster, he told himself. All because of the monster.

He now felt the *kick* from the chemical: the familiar feeling of being *safe*. But it also left him disoriented and restless. The greatest challenge for the days to come would be for him to stay still inside his flat. For now he could keep himself occupied by eating. Alexander took a random package of a ready-made meal out of the fridge and placed it into the oven.

At one point Alexander couldn't stand the silence of his apartment anymore, and so he started fishing out CDs at random from the shelf, then tossing the ones that he couldn't think of putting on in the corner. He finally found a CD that he could see working, and put it on. The hammering electric guitar and hoarse cries of Godsmack chimed through the air, bringing out the true mood of *Survival*: a *war-cry* against the monster.

But then he could hear a scream that wasn't a part of the music at all. It was coming from the building, a hopeless cry of pain or fear. Alexander froze. The disturbance had no doubt come from his neighbour's flat. The monster had arrived. If Alexander hadn't taken so much Survival, he would be as good as dead.

He turned the music off, but by then the screams of his neighbour had ceased. Who had it been? That loner across the hall, perhaps – that one who had never really become friends with Alexander, despite the fact that both of them lived alone and were roughly the same age. It had certainly sounded like him. Alexander had to make sure that he had enough Survival in his system. He went back for the container and pinched more of the substance, brought it to his nose – a couple of doses.

If the other residents of this building found out, they might end up breaking down Alexander's door just to get their hands on his stash. He pressed the lid on the flour container, making sure that it was tightly sealed, and then he placed the container back into the kitchen cupboard.

You will be a suspect, a voice went off in the back of his head. That was what had happened with that first survivor of an attack by the monster; since the man had been intoxicated, the police had pinned the murders on him. The same could just as easily happen to Alexander. And so it wouldn't be safe for him to stick around with the monster in the building, framing him for the murder of his neighbour now that it couldn't get to Alexander in other ways.

He put his jacket and shoes on. He felt convinced that he should stay away from his flat for a while – just as long as he had that emergency shot of Survival on him, along with the lace that he would use to bring out the vein in his arm so that he could put the needle in it. He hadn't forgotten about that. He was still thinking clearly, even with all the Survival he had taken.

Just as he was ready to make a quick exit out the front door, Alexander stopped and reflected that perhaps it wasn't the safest way to go, as he might

run into the monster in the corridor, or even the police. And there was another way to get out: he could climb from the window that was next to the fire stairs and from there he could get down to the ground. Alexander hurried over there.

Alexander walked in strides along the sidewalk, making it seem as if he were heading somewhere specific, although he was merely going in circles, for the sake of wasting time – staying away from the monster and that incriminating building. It was dark outside and all the shops of the area were now closed. There was nowhere for Alexander to get inside, unless he went back home. The only option was a lit underpass that ran under a four-lane road. It looked welcoming to Alexander and even preferable to some place of business, where he could hardly hope to be by himself. With any luck he could stay under that road until sunrise and then he would return to his flat.

He was alone in the underpass, yet something in there was making Alexander feel discomfort. He looked about himself, expecting the worst, but there was truly *no one* else there with him. Then Alexander realised what it was in this underpass that was giving him the creeps: it was the excessive graffiti on the concrete walls. It wouldn't stay still! *Moving* graffiti was the worst! By now it had become impossible for him to make out what the original scribbling was supposed to represent, before it came to life and became all entangled and distorted.

“Take comfort in it,” Alexander tried to assure himself. “This is the *embodiment* of Survival – whatever else it may look like.”

It was the monster! That was what the abstract images in front of him were struggling to represent; the monster that Alexander had never seen, and had no idea as to what it could look like.

Now a shadow was passing over the graffiti-cartoon, cast by someone who was entering the underpass, joining Alexander there. He turned and saw *the mechanic* who had sold him the Survival, standing next to him. He was still wearing his army jacket and had his long moustache – which gave him a most careless demeanour. The dealer kept his hand in his pocket and went on standing silently, as if he were looking straight through Alexander.

Alexander laughed at the absurdity of the image.

“No!” he shouted. “You got it wrong, you idiotic hallucination! The dealer was *not* the monster!”

He shouted it directly in the dealer’s face, as if that would serve to shatter the illusion. Yet the dealer remained there, and his expression remained indifferent, even while he had to listen to Alexander’s words repeated to him, as the shouting had produced an echo in the underpass. Rather than dying out – as it should have – the echo became *amplified* and entered a loop.

The dealer is not the monster! The dealer is not the monster!

The dealer is the monster, the echo now responded to Alexander in his own voice.

Alexander was deeply disturbed by this effect. These sounds would surely attract attention to the underpass, where he had wanted to be left alone. Furthermore, his echo was betraying him by giving away his private thoughts, exposing them to the world. Alexander hurried out of the underpass, away from the dealer, who remained standing like a statue. But the echo stayed with him. It followed him around, reproduced just as clearly as before, even now that there were no walls around him.

...the monster is coming back, the echo went on, as a second part of a conversation that had apparently been going on without Alexander paying any attention to it while he ran.

The monster and the dealer are both coming back!

The graffiti from the underpass was following him as well. Now Alexander could see it reproduced on the wall of a building, moving just as much as before – even faster. Alexander could read some words in it: *The monster rules!!!*

Alexander ran back the way he had come. The streets didn't feel any safer than his flat. He struggled to empty his mind as he ran, not to run into any more hallucinations, but only focus on the clunky footsteps of his running. The echo had mercifully died out.

He reached his apartment building, but only then did Alexander realise that he hadn't brought his home keys along with him – only that syringe of Survival. He figured that he could still get back inside the same way as he had gone out earlier: taking the fire stairs. That way he could reach the window to his flat and climb inside.

The metal steps produced horrible clattering as Alexander staggered up the stairs. It was important that he passed unnoticed. The height he had reached from the ground further increased his anxiety. An illusion *could* actually kill him up there; if it managed to startle Alexander, or rattle him enough, he might lose his balance and fall to his death. Alexander imagined himself seeing a man blocking his path and then pushing him down. And the more he imagined it, the likelier it became that it would come true. He struggled to obliterate the thought.

Alexander now had the window to his flat in front of him, but reaching it would still require some acrobatics. That would normally have been enough to discourage him from going any further, but, as it stood, Alexander had no time to waste, so he just went ahead. He surprised himself with how effortlessly he was able to leap and then grab onto the slid of the window – yet the second part of heaving himself up, and pulling himself through the opening, somehow went down less gracefully. He finally ended up on the floor of his flat, and the first thing he wanted to do was to rush to the kitchen and get more Survival.

But he had entered the wrong flat. He was on the wrong floor. The struggle of making that jump from the stairs and then climbing in through the window

had occupied his mind so much that he hadn't noticed that this flat looked completely different – or at least the parts of it he could see. The streetlights outside, coming in through unshielded windows, were the only source of light in there. It was still too dark for Alexander to make out everything the whole space in front of him. He could see the front door from where he stood, as it was in a similar position as the one of his own flat. His familiarity with the building would enable him to make a quick exit. But then he would need to go all the way outside again and climb back up those hazardous steps, to enter his own flat through the window. Alexander couldn't tell if anyone was at home in this flat. If there happened to be anyone there, perhaps that person would relate to Alexander's situation, of having gotten locked outside. Maybe the owner of the flat wouldn't even take it so badly.

If the neighbour wasn't away, he was clearly asleep. There was some chance that he would think that Alexander were a burglar, if he discovered him there. Alexander couldn't think straight. He needed more Survival. He had that emergency shot in his pocket, but this still wasn't necessarily the most appropriate moment to use it. The two contrasting choices, of getting out of the flat as quickly as he could on the one hand, and seeing if he found anyone else inside the flat who could help him on the other, rendered Alexander incapable of moving at all, for a while.

Eventually he proceeded to sluggishly feel his way along the walls. He reached an open entrance to a bathroom. Alexander went inside the room and pushed the door back without closing it completely. He turned on the light and then reopened the door just enough to slide outside. The light coming from the bathroom now lit up the areas of the living room that had previously been shaded. Alexander wasn't alone in there. Someone was lying on the sofa in the corner.

Alexander reached back with his hand inside the bathroom and killed the light. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and this time he could make out enough

of the person on the sofa, with the light coming in through the windows. The possibility now occurred to Alexander that this person wasn't even alive. Perhaps he was looking at someone who had been killed by the monster. Alexander went closer to the sofa. The person lying in it was a woman. She stirred in her sleep, but didn't show any signs of waking up.

Alexander found her attractive through the darkness, and guessed that she was in her early twenties. Her face was pale while her long hair was pitch-black. She looked downright tantalising – but would she ever be friendly to Alexander now that he had broken into her flat? She wouldn't be living there alone anyway, and why was she sleeping on the sofa? Was there someone in the bedroom as well? There were no sounds coming from anywhere in the flat, aside from the girl's breathing.

In the end, this girl should be thankful that it was only Alexander who had entered her flat, and not the monster – although the monster might still show up as well. Then it would devour the girl on the sofa, right there in front of Alexander. He was in no danger himself, as his blood was still contaminated enough, but her blood was probably clean. The thought was uncomfortable, yet realistic. Alexander felt a sense of responsibility towards this girl, as if, by his slipup in breaking into her flat instead of his own, the young woman had been placed by fate into his care. She looked like someone that Alexander could have considered dating. There was something irresistible about the woman, something in her face, and something about the pose that she kept while sleeping so peacefully, as if it somehow expressed her whole easy-going attitude towards life. And Alexander felt that hers was a life worth preserving. He *had to* warn her against the monster, as their apartment building had already been invaded.

But Alexander could do *more* for her; there had been something inviting about the pose that she kept in her sleep all along – the way that one arm was dangling out of the sofa, with the back of her hand resting on the floor. If the

monster got into the flat and managed to kill her, it would only be because Alexander didn't act quickly enough; he could have given her the emergency shot that he had on him, straight into her exposed arm. He could even do it now as a precaution. Alexander felt that he would be able to give this person the only dose of Survival he had on him, even though she might never understand why he had done it. He felt like he owed it to her for being there, for breaking into her apartment – or perhaps it was simply that he was falling *in love* with her, right there.

The girl shifted on the sofa. There was no guaranty that she would stay in this position with her arm out for long. But Alexander needed more light to inject her properly. He took silent, cautious steps back to the bathroom and reached for the light switch beyond the door. As the light came on, Alexander positioned the door so that the living room became illuminated enough without the beam of light shining into the girl's face. He made his way back, and found her still in the same position as before. He kneeled down next to her arm. He took out the syringe and the shoelace, but then he realised that he wouldn't even need the lace: he had both his hands free since he wasn't injecting himself and could simply use his fingers of one hand to put pressure on the arm and bringing out the vein. He held the syringe in a position and then he grabbed the girl's arm, pressing down on the pit on the other side of her elbow. The girl stirred; she was becoming awake. The veins were visible. Just as spontaneously as Alexander had made the jump from the fire stairs to the window before, he now drove the needle into one of the veins. And then he thrust Survival into her arm. The girl tried to pull back her arm, but Alexander held it tight. She opened her eyes. She stared down at the needle in her arm, and then she turned to Alexander. She looked terrified. He pulled the needle out and she gave a shriek. She now moved her arm quickly away from him and held it up to herself. She stared at Alexander and breathed heavily.

“*Why* did you do that?” she whimpered.

He had expected her to scream – in fact she wasn't reacting as badly as she could have. Yet Alexander was lost for words. *Why* had he done it?

“*Donna,*” she called. “Where is Donna?”

Alexander put his fingers to his mouth and pursed his lips, but it was to no avail; she started screaming.

“*Donna-aaa! Help, Donna!*”

Alexander's worst fears were coming true. Soon there would be *Donna* there as well, and he would have her to deal with, and whoever else was in that flat. This felt like the right moment for him to make his exit out of there. But then his sacrifice to this girl would have been for nothing. Eventually the substance would dry in her blood and then the monster would be able to attack her again. *No*; Alexander had to let her know why he had done it. But he needed to calm her down first. He backed away from her, keeping his hands up as a sign of surrender, but with the empty syringe still in his hand. The girl was choking on her own scream. She receded into a coughing fit. As it stopped, and the girl didn't start screaming again immediately, there was a window for Alexander to get a word in. He indicated the empty syringe in his hand.

“This is an antidote,” he whispered.

“*An antidote?*” She had caught the word, despite the fuss. “An antidote *to what?*” she demanded.

Alexander could see that her pupils had dilated. As much as he would have wanted it to be out of her interest in him, more likely it was the effect of the substance in her blood. Perhaps this wouldn't be the right moment to try to explain things to her – or maybe, on the contrary, this was *exactly* the right time: only when you were on Survival could you truly appreciate its effect and its importance.

“Well, it's not exactly an antidote – but then, it *is*, to the monster.”

“The *monster*? Are you *insane*? What the hell did you inject me with? You have to tell me. *Oh, god.*”

She turned away from Alexander, writhing in desperation and anguish. With the movements she was making it looked as if she were about to crawl up the back of the sofa to then hide behind it.

“Please go,” she said, in between heavy strokes of breath. “Please just leave me here. You won’t get anywhere with me. Donna will be back and she will *fuck you up*.”

“Donna may already be dead,” Alexander said. If this other person had been in the flat then she would surely have come out at this point. “There is a *monster* out there.”

“*Why the fuck do you keep saying that?*” she cried. “*Why you keep saying ‘monster’? What the fuck is this monster?*”

Alexander started to regret having given this girl his Survival. It now seemed that she wasn’t the gentle creature he had taken her for while she was sleeping. But, *no*, he thought to himself; this was the natural effect of dope. She would get used to it, just like he had, and she wouldn’t always become like this. Alexander shouldn’t turn his back on her so quickly.

“I *will* leave,” he said, trying to come off as calm and convincing as he could. “But first I want you to *understand* that I have made an enormous sacrifice for you here. The monster is a predator that is drawn to your blood. The only way to escape from it is to get *this* into your system.” He showed her the syringe. “The monster has already killed someone in this building,” he went on.

He looked to the window. From the view outside it became clear to him at once that not only had he entered the wrong flat, but even the wrong building. His house was the one next door.

“*Shit*,” he said to himself. He turned back to the woman on the sofa. “I have to get back now. *My* blood is drying up. I need more of this chemical to protect myself against the monster.”

He turned to leave.

“*Wait*,” she called after him.

Alexander turned back to her.

“What do *I* do?” she asked him.

“I have supplies at home. You can come along. Or you can stay behind and make sure that you get more of this chemical.”

“Yes, but what’s the chemical called?” she asked him impatiently.

“I can’t tell you that,” he said in a low voice. As soon as he would give her the real name of the substance she would stop believing him. “I just call it Survival.”

The girl got up from the sofa, but stumbled and almost fell as she did so.

“*Wait*; I’ll go with you.”

Her name was Lilith. She didn’t live in the flat where Alexander picked her up, but was there visiting her friend, the aforementioned Donna. It was Saturday morning and they had been out together the night before, but Lilith had gone back ahead of her friend. That was about all the information that Alexander could get from her – or, *if* there was anything else that she had told him, then he had already forgotten. She hadn’t asked many questions about him either; her interest lay mostly in knowing about the monster and the substance that kept it away. But Alexander wasn’t sure about what he should tell her. The details that he had once known had become hazy to him. He wasn’t even sure where his knowledge of the monster had come from. Keeping track of that hadn’t been a priority next to staying alive and being safe from the monster. But if he admitted that to Lilith, she might stop believing him. He had to fill in the details.

“You see, the *great* discovery – of keeping the monster away with the intake of the substance – happened by accident. A lot of people had been killed

by the monster at that point, and the only one to escape had this chemical in his blood. He teamed up with some scientists to try to find a way to defeat the monster.”

As Alexander let go of the words he started to believe them himself. It seemed that this story had come out far too spontaneously for it to be a complete fabrication. Perhaps he was remembering the true accounts, in his efforts to come up with a false one.

“Shouldn’t they have let *everybody* know?” Lilith asked. “Shouldn’t there have been a public announcement about this?”

They were reaching his building – the *right one*, this time.

“Those men had to *preserve* their knowledge to save themselves,” Alexander maintained, in an effort to make sense of his own story. “Even though they *wanted* to save everyone else, they had to make sure that they were safe in order for them to be successful.”

The sun was coming up. The risk of the two of them being spotted, climbing in through the window, was higher now than it had been during the night. Alexander felt that he had grown more cautious as well, more responsible, now that he had someone in his custody. He felt determined to get her to his flat and then feed her more Survival. And there was an upside to going in through the window in daylight, which was that Alexander wouldn’t mistake the building, or his flat.

“We have to use the fire stairs and then climb into my flat through the window.”

“You have to break into *your own* apartment?”

“I’m afraid we’re locked outside, and it’s the only way for us to get in. Quick; follow me.”

He made his way up the steps as silently as he could, but his new companion wasn’t as careful, and created quite the racket with her steps. It made Alexander feel anxious. He reached the window that he was positive was

the right one. He let Lilith go first, giving her support to climb through the window.

“This is crazy,” he could hear her whisper as she heaved herself up, but he didn’t feel any urge to respond. Soon there would be a big payoff for both of them.

He followed her in.

“There’s no one else in your flat, right?” Lilith asked, once they had landed in the living room.

“Just you and me,” Alexander confirmed.

“Oh, god; my heart is beating so fast,” she said. “I never did anything this crazy when I was younger. I always wanted to – you know, when I was a teenager – but I guess I never had the guts. I’m being reborn. But what if we get caught?”

“Remember: this *is* my flat. We’re not breaking into anyone else’s.”

“Then why didn’t you have the key?”

“I had to leave here in a hurry. Look; I’ll prove it to you.”

Alexander went into the kitchen. He opened the cupboard where he kept the container of Survival. Lilith observed from behind him. He took the lid off and showed her inside.

“This isn’t *flour*; it’s Survival.”

“Cool,” she said. “It’s like a fairy-tale.”

“We could try baking with it later,” Alexander suggested, jokingly. “But I don’t know any recipes.”

He took a pinch of the substance and brought it up to his nose. The feeling made him forget all about Lilith for the moment. He picked up another pinch and took it in his other nostril.

“Can I?” She picked up a piece of the powder herself. She brought it up to her nose and sucked it all in. She gasped and smiled. She went in with her fingers for more and was quick to sniff that in as well.

She stepped backwards, drifting into the living room. She sat down on the sofa, with her eyes closed. She looked perfectly at ease, as if she were taking in the full enjoyment of the experience. But Alexander got the impression that she was waiting for something else to happen.

She opened her eyes.

“It’s not the same,” she let out.

“It is *exactly* the same,” said Alexander. “Though it may feel a bit different. But the important thing is that you are *protected*.”

“But it felt very different before.”

“That time you were injected, but now you were not. It’s not going to feel as strong when you take it up your nose, but it’s just as effective.”

“I should take another shot then, just to be safe,” she said.

“You can’t. I only had that one syringe and we left it in your friend’s flat.”

“*Fuck*. We should go back for it.”

“Not now. We just got back.”

“But this time you could bring your home keys.”

“No, listen; we’ll go back for it later. Now we should eat. I have a whole menu of ready-made meals. It’s important for us to stay nourished while we’re on Survival, even if we don’t feel any hunger.”

He opened his fridge and looked through his supplies. He wanted to choose the best dish for his guest, but couldn’t make up his mind. All that he had to go on were the pictures on the packages.

Alexander decided on a package of pasta with cream and mushrooms. He took it out and then pierced the plastic film that sealed it. He placed the package in the oven.

“Donna’s going to freak out,” he heard Lilith saying behind him, but he didn’t feel like acknowledging it. With all that he had told her about the monster, the girl still didn’t seem to realise what the new priorities were.

“How would it enter the flat – the monster?” she asked him.

Alexander felt put off by getting more questions about the monster that he couldn't answer.

“We don't know enough yet. Only that people have been killed at home. So the monster has some way of getting in.”

They were sitting in two separate sofas, with the television was on. Lilith wasn't watching it. Instead she was rubbing her thumb against the spot where Alexander had injected her. She turned to look at him.

“Xander; what's your plan?”

Alexander turned off the TV with the remote and stood up to pace around the living room.

“My *plan*? Three-hundred grams is my plan.”

“Yeah, *great*; *Three-hundred grams*, and *then* what?”

“Hopefully that's going to be enough.”

“*Enough*? It's never gonna be enough for you; you're a *junkie*.”

“I'm *not* a junkie. I don't do this thing because I like it. I only do it because I *have* to; because it's the only way that I will survive.”

“Yeah, great; you survive while you are all high, and then what? What will you do when your drugs run out?”

“You want to know my plan? Here's my plan: we wait it out – OK? Let the people who are sober and have to fight for their survival take care of it.”

“So, just leave it to them?”

“Oh, yes.”

“So, you trust those people better than you trust yourself?”

“One-hundred percent, because there are a million of them and just one of me, you see.”

“But you do realise that there are more ways to die than just being attacked by the monster. You could starve to death, for instance, once you’ve finished all those meals in your fridge. And you don’t have any source of income.”

Alexander still had no doubts regarding the plans he had made, even if he seemed to be failing in getting it through to Lilith.

“I *had* thought about that when I was counting my money,” he responded. “And do you know what I realised? That it’s not a problem, because we can enter the homes of the people who have been killed by the monster and eat their food.”

“That’s bullshit. It’s never going to work. Not in a million years.”

“I can guaranty that it *will* work. Just look, my neighbour – case in point. I heard him screaming yesterday. And I know that it was the monster. So he’s *dead* now. But there was no police. The police aren’t coming anymore. The situation has already gotten to the point where there is *nothing* anyone can do. And we just have to survive, and then we can pick up the things that the other people leave behind them, lying around for us.”

“So you are saying that we should enter your neighbour’s flat and start stealing his stuff?”

“Absolutely. We’ll have to do it at some point. We might as well get around to it right away.”

“You want us to break into his flat right now?”

“Oh, I insist. If the monster got into his flat then it must have gotten in through a window. We should be able to get in the same way – climbing as we did before.”

“But do you know which flat it is?”

Alexander thought about it.

“I had the feeling that I knew exactly where it was coming from when I heard it, yes. It’s the guy across the hall.”

“Then let’s just go and knock on his fucking door first. And hopefully we’ll find that he is alive.”

Later they were standing outside the door to his neighbour’s flat. Alexander gave a gentle tap on the panel.

There was no response.

Alexander put his ear against the door, but heard nothing from the other side. He turned to Lilith, where she was standing behind him.

“I was right,” he said.

“Knock again. Harder.”

Alexander gave another, more assertive, knock on the door. He then instinctively moved his hand down to the handle and turned it. The door was unlocked. Lilith gave a startled gasp, but Alexander raised his hand to calm her. He pushed the door open and stepped inside his neighbour’s flat.

The foul air in the apartment seemed in itself to confirm Alexander’s suspicion, yet Lilith went on in as if she were oblivious to where the stench would be ascending from. Alexander took her over. He still felt that he needed to protect her. In his rush he walked straight into the middle of the living room, where the walls had been *painted* with blood.

Lilith shrieked at the sight of it. Much of the furniture in the living room had turned red as well. Then there was a pile of something on the floor. Alexander assumed that it was the remainders of his neighbour, though he wouldn’t go closer to check.

“Oh, god,” Lilith exclaimed in a subdued voice.

“*You see?*” Alexander whispered.

Yet he didn’t feel any sense of triumph over having been right. It was as if he were being robbed of his moment of glory by the horrific state of the apartment. It was hard to even imagine how the monster had been able to inflict so much damage on its victims.

“*Come on; let’s go,*” said Lilith.

“Don’t you want to raid the place?” Alexander whispered back to her. *“He could have food, or money.”*

“I’m not staying.” Lilith hurried out of the flat.

Alexander took one last look around the flat before joining Lilith in the corridor.

But she wasn’t going back to his flat at all. Instead she was running down the stairs. Alexander sprinted after her.

“Lilith! Wait!” he shouted. But she ran faster.

She was out the front door before he had reached the ground floor. He followed her as quickly as he could.

The headway that she had made on him was too great. Alexander saw Lilith running away at a distance, in a different direction from the house where he had found her. He tried going after her. He shouted her name, as if that could get her to come to her senses and return to him. She was almost out of his sight. Alexander stopped running. He waited, panting, but she didn’t return. Alexander went back to his house, only to discover that once again he was locked outside. He would have to ascend those fire steps and enter through the window once more. But at least now it was getting dark again, and so it was less likely that anyone would notice him than it had been during the day – if anyone paid attention to anything at all in this area, seeing as how his neighbour had been torn apart screaming and no one had come to help him.

He thought about Lilith the whole way up – bitter thoughts. He felt like telling her off for getting him into this situation; for taking him for granted and then running out on him. But once he had gone in through the window it was as if his outlook on the situation had immediately changed: he figured that was better off without her. This way he wouldn’t have to share his supplies of Survival with anyone – speaking of which, he deserved a reward from all his effort of climbing back up and breaking into his own flat once more.

The flour container was still out from before. Alexander took the lid off and grabbed a small pile into his palm and brought up to his nose. He sucked up as much of it as he could. Then he threw what remained back into the container. He felt his heartbeat grow faster, his energy revived.

He turned around and saw Lilith standing there, next to him. She had startled him, but not as greatly as the crime scene had before.

“I did not do this to summon you,” Alexander said.

“I know,” said Lilith. She looked perfectly calm and self-confident; he had never seen her this way, except maybe from the impression he got of her when he was looking at her sleeping.

“Things got a bit too real for you, didn’t they?” he said to her.

Lilith pulled her upper lip as if she meant to snarl at him before she spoke.

“You failed me,” said the apparition. “Now I’m out there, on my own, getting killed.”

“For that you have only yourself to blame,” said Alexander. “I tried to save you.”

He had spontaneously started to turn away from her, but then he stopped himself; if he looked away from her she might disappear, and then he would be alone again.

“You will get to know it when I die,” she said provokingly.

Alexander didn’t catch what she had meant.

“Whatever happens to me *out there*, it will be reflected on my presence here.”

“Stop it.”

“You will get to watch me die. See the monster peeling off my skin the way it did with your neighbour.”

Now he *wanted* her to be gone, so this time he turned away from her for real.

But Lilith remained where she was.

“*Oh, no,*” she exclaimed, as if she were acting out a scene. “*There’s the monster!*”

Alexander looked at her, and saw how she was looking wide-eyed into nothing at all. It was the same empty stare as had come out in her face right after he had given her the shot of Survival.

“You are playing!” he shouted at her. “Stop it!”

But Lilith started screaming.

Her body turned on itself. It was as if she were having a seizure. And then the skin on her cheeks started peeling away from the muscle – as she had promised.

This is really happening!

Alexander looked away, but he could see the blood gathering on the carpet at his feet. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Her scream turned into an echo. And when Alexander opened his eyes again the apparition was gone.

His heart was hammering. With all the visions he had had so far, this was the one that he found the hardest to dismiss for what it was. Whether the vision *had* been accurate or not, there was a truth to it: Lilith *could* end up getting killed by the monster. It probably hadn’t happened yet, as the Survival that she had in her system would protect her, but then that wouldn’t last forever. And she could be getting into other dangers as well. She hadn’t even known where she was running.

For the first time since he had started taking Survival, Alexander felt that there really was no point in surviving. Not if he couldn’t protect her. He had to go out and find Lilith, bring her back to his flat.

Alexander rushed to the front door.

He ran the way he imagined that she had gone. He tried to figure out where she would have turned and what she would be heading for, but all the way his efforts felt futile. He never got any indication that he could be on the right track. He hadn't noticed a single person in the streets. It was as if his visions, rather than adding people into his surroundings, had now started *overwriting* those who were already there, replacing them with nothing. Even though it was night there should be people going around. It was as if something had already happened, and that now the public knew about the menace. How long would it be until they found out about Survival as well?

Alexander felt that he was picking up on her scent. He followed it. It grew stronger around the corner. But there was something unpleasant about it. Just before Alexander had reached the corner – to discover the truth with his own eyes – it came to him: the smell that made him think of her was actually what his neighbour's apartment had reeked of – the stench of the dead man who had been turned inside out in his flat. Alexander had become a blood hound.

He was now looking at another victim of the monster, although what he mostly saw were the massive blood stains that reached high up the wall of a house and far into the road. A car that was covered in blood as well was blocking Alexander's view of the victim itself. He walked sideways to get a view of it, and saw the heavily mutilated body. Alexander immediately had to avert his eyes. But he felt convinced from what he had seen that the corpse did not belong to Lilith. He couldn't go any closer to make sure, but it *couldn't* be her. Alexander had to go on looking.

He turned into another road. There were no people there either. Except for one person. Someone was running towards Alexander. It wasn't Lilith; this was a man. The rapid speed at which the man came felt like it was another hallucination. He was running for his life, and screaming.

“Monster! Monster! Help!”

The man slowed down, as if he couldn't keep that speed up anymore, just before he reached Alexander. The man was skinny, with curly, dark hair. He looked petrified.

“We have to get out of here,” he urged Alexander. “*We have to call the police! There's a monster!*”

Alexander kept his composure and tried to calm the man down. He wanted to know if the man had seen Lilith. But the runner seemed to be too occupied with something else that he had seen. So all Alexander was able to ask him in the end was: “where?”

“I don't know.” The man's face became contorted. He started sobbing.

Alexander's heartbeat had suddenly grown so strong that he couldn't notice anything of what was happening around him. He could sense his heart beating inside his *head*; he could hear it outside of himself as well. And then his heart seemed to skip a beat, and with that Alexander felt as if his chest would collapse. He kneeled to the ground, clasping for his heart, struggling to breathe. He saw the man in front of him showing similar reaction, as if he were mimicking Alexander, or if the exact same thing was happening to him. What were the odds?

Alexander felt as if he were losing consciousness. But his senses were still functioning: he could still *hear* the heartbeat, outside of himself, chiming in the air. And in that moment Alexander realised that it wasn't his own heartbeat that he was hearing. The reason why it had felt so strong before was because of how loud it was, amplified from somewhere close to Alexander. No, it hadn't been Alexander's heartbeat, yet it had ended up interfering with his own, making it turn irregular and nearly giving him a heart attack.

Lying on the ground, Alexander looked up and saw the source of the alien heartbeat before him: a colossal heart that was floating in the air, hovering over the two of them. It looked to Alexander like a normal human heart that he could be holding up to his face, from the dimensions – and yet it was far away from

him, nearer to the other man than to himself. Alexander was like an ant in its presence. It wasn't just a heart that Alexander was looking at, but there was also something surrounding it, something like a body: a leathery scale that was splayed out into the air just as unnaturally as the heart was floating in the air itself. Several long, spindly, spidery legs stretched out of the body; some of them reaching the ground and were keeping the heart up, but then some were free and were sticking into the air like antennas.

The free legs quickly darted forward, all of them at once; they were thrust into the other man – all with the accuracy and self-confidence of highly evolved animal instincts. The man was defeated immediately. He couldn't even struggle against it now that he had been hit. He was no longer standing on his feet – which had gone limp – but instead the antennas were keeping him in an upright position, where he trembled while otherwise remaining rigid. The man had become an extension of the organism that had attacked him. The big heart was pumping, heaving and contracting furiously.

Even though the heart went on beating, the deafening sound from before had ceased, and with that it had loosened its grip on Alexander's own heart. He had become temporarily paralysed earlier, but now he was able to move again. He got up and sprinted away. There was nothing that he could do to help the other man, who was being sucked dry and was probably beyond salvation. Alexander headed back in the direction that he had come out of – focusing only on getting as far away from the monster as he could. He turned around the corner, into the other road, but there he stopped himself. He was panting. It felt as if he were out of harm's way already, just by not having the giant heart in sight.

He had never been in any danger anyway. He *knew* that it wouldn't touch him, as long as he had Survival in his blood. That had been confirmed.

So sure did Alexander feel of his own safety in this moment that he even went back to look around the corner. Half a block away, the heart was still devouring the man through the antennas, but the free ones – that were neither

sucking blood out of the man nor supporting the heart – had now began *spraying* blood around, in all directions. This was how the blood had ended up all around the other corpses. It was an incredibly wasteful act, and it seemed somehow logical to assume that the heart wouldn't be fully fed this way – which was a terrifying idea. Alexander felt some of the blood being sprinkled in his face, despite the distance. He had to look away.

As Alexander then turned back to the scene, the heart was gone. He turned in all directions, to see if it was still in that same road, but he saw no signs of it. The heart had vanished just as quickly and effortlessly as it had appeared. The man was still there, as a rubble on the ground. Alexander felt the fear rising in him – not for himself, but for Lilith. She was still out there and she could become a target for the monster once she didn't have Survival in her blood anymore. He *had* to find her. Alexander went back around the corner and ran.

He looked in every direction as he made his way through the empty streets. He stopped himself as he saw someone lying motionless on the road. He hurried over there. There was no blood anywhere, so this person couldn't have been attacked by the monster. Before he had reached her, Alexander saw that this person was a woman. Then, the closer he got, common features with Lilith became clear. Finally he could see that it was in fact Lilith herself who was lying there. Alexander couldn't tell if she were breathing or not, although it seemed most likely that she wasn't.

But it didn't make sense; her body was still intact, and so the monster hadn't gotten to her. Alexander reflected on his own experience with the giant heart. When it had *projected* its own heartbeat it had disrupted Alexander's, interfering with the pacing of his heart. The same could have happened to Lilith, only her heart had given in and she had suffered a full cardiac arrest as a result of it. Alexander had to get her to the hospital, fast. But he couldn't ask anyone for help to get her there, as he was completely alone in the street. The hospital might be as full as the streets were empty, he thought; all because of the

monster. Lilith wasn't the first victim. The man before wouldn't even have been the first. The hospitals would be over-flooded and chaotic at this point.

Alexander had to help her on his own.

What would the paramedics have done for her if they had been there? Alexander tried to visualise it, and to learn from the images that came to him. There would surely be some CPR involved, and then they would try using that device on her that gave electric shocks through a person's chest. That was how they saved people from heart attacks. If only Alexander had access to some electricity.

The image of a sign that he had seen earlier jumped to his mind; a yellow sign, with a triangle, that read: *Warning: high voltage!* He had seen it somewhere as he was running around, looking for Lilith. It was on a metal box by some house by one of the roads. It was what was called a transformer. It seemed hopeless that Alexander would be able to locate it in his memory. But he lifted Lilith up from the ground and, holding her, he ran back the way he had come before – in hope that his instincts would somehow bring him back to the spot where he had seen the sign and the transformer.

Lilith was sliding out of his arms. Alexander had to adjust his grip on her, and ended up with one arm threaded between her legs. It wouldn't look very graceful – not exactly *bridal* – but Alexander couldn't think about that now. Then he saw it: the transformer box by an industrial house. He ran the last piece of road towards it. Even if he was eager to pry the door of the box open at once, he still minded Lilith in his arms, and carefully placed her on the ground. She was long gone, he figured, but still he had to go on since he had come this far.

He picked up a rock from the ground and pounded the handle to the door of the box with it. The handle eventually gave in and the door became dented. Alexander pushed the rock into the slit that had formed and tried to force it through. The door came off. Alexander could see cables running into an electric station. He yanked a couple of them and they came loose. The cables responded

to each other, giving a spark as he brought them close. Alexander turned to the dead girl and dragged her closer, so that he could then reach her with the cables. He put the cables up to her chest.

She jumped up as the electricity went through her. Her eyes turned wide-open, and she gaped helplessly into the air. She was struggling to breathe, reacting as if she were dying rather than coming to life. Alexander felt a sudden sense of triumph, but it was immediately followed with a less satisfying revelation: that the woman whom he had saved wasn't Lilith at all – in fact she looked nothing like her. How he could not have noticed it before was now beyond him.

Had this one been worth all his efforts: how he had strained himself, rendering himself unable to do any further lifting or running? She wasn't the love of his life – not the one that he had set off to find. This one was a fraud. But, as Lilith might be dead, should he tell her about Survival? She still looked frantic and disoriented, staring wildly into the air as she coughed and struggled to breathe. It didn't seem like they would be having any conversations any time soon.

Alexander thought he had started to hear the alien heartbeat behind him, but he couldn't be sure that it wasn't another one of his hallucinations. Then he heard the second beat and with the third one it seemed definite that he *wasn't* imagining it. The woman was also looking up, terrified, but she still could neither speak nor scream. Alexander turned around and saw the giant heart standing over them! It had appeared out of nowhere, just like before. What Alexander instantly felt was not fear, but guilt; he had brought the woman to the monster as food. He knew what would happen next; he had seen it before. Alexander felt his own heartbeat growing heavier from the disturbance of the external one. Soon he would be lying on the ground, looking helplessly up at the woman being pierced by the heart-spider. It was just about to happen.

Just before Alexander had become completely paralysed, he tried to summon all the strength he had in him, and made one last attempt at saving the woman. He sprung forward, and pushed her out of harm's way.

Then there was an explosion.

Alexander had ended up lying on top of the woman. Now he couldn't get off her, as he had become unable to move at all. And now he had what he believed would be his last, noble thought: that if the monster wanted to get to her it would have to go through *him*.

Yet he felt no impact.

The loud heartbeat went on, but it was somehow less effective than it had been before, less focused. It didn't smother Alexander's own heartbeat anymore, and it didn't keep him trapped in a state of paralysis. He was able to turn his head, and with that he saw where the giant heart went on pumping furiously, rapidly rising and falling, while its spidery legs ran straight as arrows into the station of the transformer box. The monster had ended up sucking electricity out of the box.

With a bang, the heart burst open, spraying blood everywhere around it, but not through the antennas like before. Alexander became electrocuted, as the particles of blood made contact with him, causing spasms in his muscles, singing everything, from his calves, thighs and buttocks, to his back, shoulders and the back of head, but not the face, as he had managed to look away. Underneath him he felt the soothing body of the woman that he was shielding from the blood.

It didn't feel to him like he would survive this ordeal – at first, but then the pain from the acid became replaced with discomfort of the cooling aftermath, with the liquid turning to stains – settling and becoming electrically discharged. Steam kept rising up from the ground all around them. Behind the screen of smoke Alexander could make out the disfigured heart, resting in the rubble of

its spidery legs and body – a mouth in the middle of the muscle still regurgitating blood out onto the ground, like a decorative fountain of Hell.

Epilogue

There was no going back. Not for society. The panic that had broken out with people becoming aware of a monster living among them, roaming the streets, left such a profound impression on them that any attempt of theirs to pick up their lives from before their revelation, now seemed futile and superficial. It was as if denial of the monster's existence had been the foundation of all of their lives. The mechanism of society hadn't merely been put on hold during the interval of the monster, but had instead been permanently damaged. People had become aliens on their own planet, wandering along the planes, without any notion of what they could expect. Everyone could tell that nothing was the same. The awareness of what they now knew would stay with them forever.

THE END

