

# Bugged

A short SF Horror Story by

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# **Boilerplate Stuff**

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## BUGGED

I flick a switch and the cockroach skits across the testbed. It's immediately compelled to move to the thermal signature of the tracks left in the sand. As it walks around the tracks a 3D model starts to build up on my laptop screen.

"See?" I say to Katy. "Not only the perfect spy, but the perfect inspector, too."

"And why are they doing it?"

I can't help emitting a little laugh. "There is no *why* for them. They can't help it. They don't know why, but I do."

"Right." She nods in apprehensive understanding. "I still hate them. They make my skin crawl."

I laugh. Daft kid. I enter the testbed and approach the roach. If it's frightened of me, it doesn't show it. *Can't* show it. I pick it up gently with a pair of forceps before taking it back to show Katy.

She screws up her face. It makes her look cute, and I can't help but take a minute to study her face; she's about ten years younger than me. I realize how damn *old* I probably seem to her. All the more reason to focus on the science.

"Ugh! Seriously, Antony, what the hell are you doing? Get it away, I don't like them!"

"Look, come here," I say, holding it under my desk lamp. After a moment, she rolls her eyes and shuffles back to me. "It won't bite. It can't. And they're clean, I promise. Thoroughbred. These aren't from some half-built hotel in 1980s Cyprus."

"You keep a good hold of those forceps. You drop it on me and I'll freak, I swear." She wheels her chair over so she can see the bug. Her perfume smells sweet. I don't want her to freak. Not in that way.

I show her the roach's underbelly and point to its flight muscles.

"See that incision?"

"No."

"Exactly. When MOD created Dstl's Cyborg Domain, we had to perform the cybernetic implant surgery by hand." I take her hand, small and soft, and hold it close – but not too close – to the bug. "Even your hands are pretty big compared to one of these little guys. And when I say implants, I'm talking clumsy stuff. Boards as

big as £2 coins glued to its back and wire antennae superglued to their heads. Poor little buggers!

“With the improvements in affordable miniature actuators, the surgery’s all done by telerobotics now. Much safer for the little guys, quicker recovery time for them, and best of all; you can’t see it! All those tiny sensors are inside the bug, pretty much completely invisible. Like I said: the perfect spy; he can detect thermal signatures, vibrations in the earth, minute sounds and even trace toxins in the air, and he’ll send it all wirelessly back...” I tap my laptop. “...to the field agents.”

She actually looks impressed, and rewards my excellent science with a beatific smile.

“But what if someone squishes him?” she says. “You’d lose all the data.”

I turn around and point to the dozens of large glass tanks arranged on the back wall. Each one seethes with my thoroughbreds. “They’re cheap.” I place the roach gently back on the sand. “I think I’ll switch him off, he deserves some lunch.”

His sensors disengaged, he scuttles happily over to the lettuce leaf in the corner and begins to nibble at it. Good lad.

A knock upon the door. Jim McGill. He lowers his spectacles to get a shameless look at Katy’s legs, the dirty old goat.

“I hope you two are getting along well?” he says, throwing a smile at her. God, it’s embarrassing.

Katy smiles, unfazed by the blatant ogle. “Fine, yes. There’s some really cool stuff going on here. Antony’s showed me what the roaches can do.”

“Hm, yes,” Jim says, ruffling through some papers. He probably doesn’t even hear her. “The project’s looking at whether the roaches can autonomously detect areas or artefacts of interest. At the moment, they only go where we tell them.”

“That’s the easy bit,” I say. As Katy looks at me I see Jim’s gaze flicker to her legs again. I imagine his heart skipping a beat. I wish it would skip a few too many.

“Yes,” he says, ogle over. “We want to see if they can sense and investigate things that we’ve not noticed. That’ll help military forensics and investigations immensely.”

“You can’t just let them do their own thing and see what they find?” Katy asks.

Jim stifles a snort. “No, dear.”

*Oh, you rotten bastard.*

“Antony, that report. I want it on the Cloud by close of play, guest or not.”

Jim closes the door behind him, Katy looks at me in disbelief, and I exhale.

“What was that about?” she asks.

“He’s a dinosaur. Classic case of pale, male and stale.”

Katy laughs. “You can’t say that, he’s my line manager while I’m here.”

“Oh, you poor thing!” I place a hand upon her arm. No resistance. “Ok, it’s my mission to rescue you from the clutches of Jim McGill. Fancy a bite to eat?”

#

We lunch at The Flag, ten minutes' drive from our dingy Gloucestershire bunker. The warm autumn sunshine and fresh breeze does me good. I take a cheeseburger, so does she, and has a beer too. Cool girl.

"So you think I need rescuing?" she says, looking up from her burger.

"Katy, I need rescuing from Jim McGill. He's had it in for me since the old WarStars project. I wanted to push the boundary on the novel sensor arrays, but he said it wasn't a priority. 'Stick to the funding scope,' he said. No ambition. That sort of thinking's what keeps the UK lagging behind the Germans and the Yanks."

Katy smiles politely. Mustn't make this about me. I take a bite of burger.

"Enough about me, and definitely enough about Jim. So you're a secondee, huh?" I say, tucking into my chips. "Which company?"

"Yellowblack Systems. I graduated from Imperial last year, and got a place there."

"Cool! I went to Imperial, too. Long time ago, though. Ten years ago."

"Oh, that's not so long ago," she smiles.

*Is she flirting with me?*

"Anyway," she continues, "my first year at Yellowblack was working on the last year of a military satellite AI project, mainly just data management."

I shake my head. Never heard of it, unsurprisingly; space isn't really my area.

"After that they arranged to send me to Dstl as part of training and development for six months. I'm getting an overview of some of the Cyborg, C2I2 and Integrated Sensor work being done; get a feel for where the priority research areas are and feedback to Yellowblack. While I'm here the project teams get an extra pair of dogsbody hands for their donkey work."

The beer garden is warm, and the sun makes her face, all twitchy smiles hiding behind untidy blonde locks and old Ray Bans, look perhaps prettier than it ought to be.

"Your hands are much too nice to be dogsbody hands," I venture, and she looks down at her burger with a blushing smile. I feel a rush of blood, but try to look cool. Bloody hell, I'm anything but cool.

"Did you, er, read up on the Cybug projects?" I ask.

"They gave me a few high level abstracts but that's it. It's still only my second week, so I'm really just seeing what's to be seen for now."

"What do you see so far?"

She doesn't answer straight away. She looks around the beer garden, distracted, as if looking for somebody she knows. Then she's back with me. "Are there any decent bars in town? I need someone to show me around."

#

When I wake I ache all over. The head hits first, then the lower back. *The back?* Maybe I really am getting too old for these kids. I rub my ribs and in the mirror find the dissipating vignette of a fresh bruise, embracing me in yellow and purple from my back. *What the hell?* I must have blacked out towards the end of the sex. Talking of which...

“Katy?”

No reply. I stumble to the fridge, open the door and look inside vacantly. Pickled onions. When I close it I find a Post-It note stuck to the door.

*Went home to get showered and changed. Thanks for a great night.*

*Katy X*

I suppose it was a pretty great night. Hopefully the first of a few more. *Christ, my head.* And my back! What the hell did we get up to? I’m not permitted time to think about it as my phone buzzes. Text from Jim telling me to get my arse in gear. As I read it I notice the time in the screen corner.

13:00.

*Shit!*

First instinct is to panic and throw some clothes on, but then I think *what’s the point?* I send Jim a message saying I’m ill, been up all night – some truth in that – and that I won’t be in today.

He replies, brusquely telling me to be all the more productive when I’m back.

*Yeah, yeah, I will.* A day in bed seems attractive. I crawl back under the covers and text Katy, asking if she wants to go out again tonight. Then I sleep.

She does want to see me again, and by the evening I’m washed and ready to go again. Headache’s gone, but the ache in my side’s still there. I have a bit of cheese on toast for dinner.

*Must eat more tomorrow.*

#

That night we take a bite to eat at Plazma, one of the soulless bars in town that cater for the young and clueless.

“Go a bit easier on me tonight.” I grin, taking her hand.

She actually laughs at me. “Was it too much?” She leans in and whispers in my ear. “And I had such high hopes for you.”

I stay off the booze that night, mostly. Just a half bottle of wine to lubricate the way, but no more. It tastes a tiny bit bitter, which I find odd, but it doesn’t put me off my stride.

*Christ, this girl’s dynamite.* I keep thinking of Fat Jim McGill wanking himself to sleep over thoughts of her, and for some reason this just turns me on all the more when I’m with her.

The next morning she's gone again. I thought I'd be happy not to have her around in the morning, but I feel a bit aggrieved she's done it twice.

And it's 1pm again! And I *still* feel hungover!

After I curse and vow no more 14% wine I text Jim. One more day off. Wouldn't be much good in the office, I say. Probably true. I throw the phone down, think about crawling back to bed, and head to the wardrobe and put a shirt and trousers on, before heading to the office.

When I'm in the office I get a morning to myself and, despite the fug in my head, get quite a bit done. The testbed in my lab is four metres square -- more than enough for any self-respecting roach to explore -- and they seem eager to work. I give my thoroughbreds a complex, unstructured testbed: lots of randomly-assorted obstacles, a few red herrings, and two artefacts of interest: my own phone and a fresh cigarette butt I pilfer from one of the ashtrays in the smokers' yard. I tell the roach to look for the phone, but not the fag-end. It should still have a faint thermal signature. Let's see if she finds both.

She turns up the phone without much fuss. Not the fag-end.

Second attempt, same result.

Third, same. Infrared shows the thermal signature's gone from the fag-end.

I go back upstairs and take another butt from the ashtray. I think I get a couple of odd looks from the losers in Maritime, but I laugh it off. "For the roaches."

"You got them smoking now?" says Josh.

"Won't that give them away?" laughs Sarah.

"In the type of military scenarios we're investigating the smoke would most likely be masked by the other toxins and smoke in the vicinity, and in any case the cockroaches wouldn't be smoking the..." I'm not saying this to Josh or Sarah. I'm already trotting back along the corridor to the lab. No-one's listening.

*Why did I stop speaking to them?*

I'm back at the testbed. I try a different roach.

Same result.

Same result again.

Different roach.

Same result. One more go and I'll need a fresh fag-end.

And then...

Roach #3 heads toward the phone. Big thermal signature. He stops, twitches. Heads to the right. *Go, little roach, go!* He goes to the butt, flickers his antennae around it. My laptop starts to build an image of the scene. Other information comes in: the shape of the thermal sig -- the smoker's lips -- and its age. Very good!

I capture the data and decide to write up the report then and there.

I look at my watch. 22:00. Ought to eat something. The office fridge is full of cans of Coke and lettuce hearts for the roaches. I give them some lettuce, saving

the juiciest leaf for Roach #3; she deserves it. I write up the rest of my report, shut down and head home.

#

The research is going well. My side still hurts but I find it easier than before to ignore the pain. Work helps. I think about Katy and want to text or email her, but I never once go for my phone, and my head hurts. Maybe I'll meet her tonight. Maybe after I've finished work. But there's lots of work to be done.

"...Antony... Antony..."

"Antony."

I look at Josh. How long has that loser been standing there?

"Jesus, Antony. Have you been here all night?"

I shake my head incredulously and look at my watch. It says 7:30am.

"Maybe," I murmur.

"Jim said you were ill. You look dreadful, mate."

"That's rather rude," I say. It is a rude thing to say, but I don't feel offended.

"I wouldn't say it if it weren't true. When was the last time you had a shower?"

I shake my head again. It was a good question.

"Look mate, go home. I'll take care of Jim. You can't work like this. If you've got some shit you need to sort out..." he waves his hands instructively. "Get yourself well."

"Yeah, I know," I say. I smell my armpits. They smell ok to me. "Josh, have you met the secondee, Katy?"

Josh smiles wryly and scratches his head. "Yeah, I'm, er, I'm going out for a few drinks with her tonight actually."

Somewhere in the back of my mind this makes me upset, but I can't process the emotion properly. I keep thinking about work.

"Ok, have a good time. Be careful."

#

I come home late. The thought of coming home while the sun was up repulsed me, so I waited until it was dark. I've got the TV on but it's just trash. I scribble some work down. God, my handwriting's shocking. I'm so hungry I could weep. I go to the fridge and open it. It smells pretty bad in there, but could be worse. There is some food in a re-sealable bag. There's a lot of condensation on the inside and I can see purple and green spots. It's hard to tell what it might have been. Sandwich? Fruit? I put it back.

What the hell time is it? 4:00. I'm guessing in the morning.

I go to bed and roll on my side.

#

When I'm at work I go to the common room and make a coffee.

As I'm stirring the hot drink I hear my name called. It's Katy, and Jim's with her. He's watching me intently, and has a tablet computer with him. Katy wears a look of... *of what?* She's trying hard not to screw her face up at me. She's wearing a white shirt and blue skirt. She looks smart.

"Hi Katy," I say. "You alright?"

"Hello, Antony," says Jim. "How are you feeling today?"

That dull thud of emotion drops somewhere in the back of my mind again. I can't ever remember Jim McGill asking me -- or anyone -- how they're feeling. It feels weird.

I shrug my shoulders. "I – I feel ok, I suppose."

He taps away on the tablet. "Any pain at all?"

"Uh, my side hurts..." I reach for my lower back, but he places a hand on my arm, preventing me from touching it.

"Don't touch it, Antony."

*Touch what?*

"How is work going? I hear it's going very well. I've seen lots of very promising results."

I smile. The thought of my hard work being recognized pleases me.

"Are you eating?" Katy asks.

"I've lost my appetite a little, actually," I say. "I only eat when I need to. I'm quite hungry now..." I realize I'm extremely hungry.

"Do you *need* to eat right now?" Jim gives me a disapproving look. I shake my head.

"Come on," he says to Katy. "These guys have a lot of work to do."

When they walk away she doesn't even look at me. What did I do? It's like she doesn't even remember that we slept together. *Women!*

I loosen my tie as my beard's getting itchy.

After she goes I look around at the common room. Josh and Tom, another research scientist from C2I2, are sitting together in one corner with another guy I don't know, and the other corner is empty. I sit with my colleagues. None of us say anything. I'm not surprised; the others look bloody awful, Josh especially. He's unshaven, his clothes haven't been washed or changed in... *days? Weeks?* He's red raw around the eyes, his skin is dry and he looks gaunt and pale, like he's lost weight. I recall him saying he plays for a local rugby team, but that can't be right. I drink my coffee. My hands are trembling, making me spill quite a lot, but I need the caffeine hit.

"You know her?" says Tom, nodding to the door.

"Yeah," I say.

“Me too.”

“Yeah, me too,” says Josh with a cracked grin. “Dynamite girl.”

“You guys look tired,” I say. “Working hard?”

Josh looks at Tom. A slow look of horror is encroaching upon his face, an open-mouthed, soulless look that sucks the colour from his features until he’s almost white. He then looks at me. I tilt my head and study him.

It’s nice to sit with my colleagues and talk about work.

#

My back isn’t throbbing so badly now but I can still see the edges of a pretty nasty bruise in the mirror. I think it’s a Saturday, and I’m quite hungry, but there’s no need to waste good food before I need it. Besides, I’ve got lots of emails and reports to be working on.

I lie in bed but find it hard to be still. I want to rub my back to find the cause of the discomfort, but something is preventing me from doing so. I think I’m dying. I recall the vague need for this to instill some urgency in me, but I can’t realize it. I push my hand, willing it, *willing* it with all the effort I can muster, around to my spine.

*There! I feel it!*

A flash of something intense enters my mind but disappears almost immediately, and I withdraw my hand in a flinch. I want to touch it again, but I can’t. The thought nags at me, so I go to the front room where my colleagues Josh, Tom, Don, and Gareth are sitting watching something on TV. It’s the only light in the room. I don’t recall inviting them, but I feel safer with them there.

“Uh, guys,” I say. My voice has withered to a croak. “Will you look at something for me?”

I pull my T-shirt off and show them my back.

“Can you see it?”

Josh gets up from the floor and walks over. He looks worse, like a half-corpse, emaciated, the colour of white noise. He runs his fingers gently over the nub on my spine. I can feel ridges, tiny bumps.

“There’s something in you,” he says. “But don’t worry. The stitches are almost faded.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

*No. I shouldn’t be relieved at that.*

“I want to cut it out,” I say. “But I can’t. You have to do it for me.”

Josh looks at me impassively, as if I’ve commented on the weather.

Josh and I scuttle to the kitchen and delve into the knife drawer. Bread knife: too jagged. Carving knife: too cumbersome. Paring knife: perfect. I cut my finger to make sure it’s sharp.

I go back to the front room. My colleagues are still on the sofa watching TV. They see Josh holding the knife.

“What’s that for?” Tom says. He’s looking pretty bad now, too.

I sit at the table and rest my head in my folded arms. As Josh cuts into my back I think pain receptors begin to flash warnings at me, but I don’t flinch. I can feel the metal and one or two fingers doing things to me. He’s no surgeon, that’s for sure. My lower back and underwear starts to feel quite sticky and warm. A vague feeling of discomfort – a tugging sensation – buds in my spine, and grows quickly. The feeling of pain grows, and grows some more...

I scream. A huge, howling, wretched, desperate screech of agony, and I thrust my hands around my back, falling off my chair. My hands are covered in blood and my spine is burning. My stomach twists and roars at me, urging me to vomit, but there’s nothing to vomit up, so I just gesture open-mouthed at the floor, offering up a trickle of saliva as my body cramps up. I roll onto my back, hands and face trembling and wet, and I see Josh, knife in one hand, and a small object in the other. It’s covered in blood, but it looks like it might be plastic or metal. His hands are awash with blood, but his face remains impassive.

“Call...” my voice is just a husk. “Call an ambulance.”

Josh’s face becomes slightly incredulous. “But I’ve got work to do. I’m late already.”

I look at the others. One or two of them are paying me attention; the others continue to stare at the TV.

“Are you ok to work?” asks Tom.

*Work.*

“Please, Josh...” I whisper, but I feel weaker. I realize I’ve not eaten properly in weeks; my arms are like twigs of lead.

Josh crouches beside me and puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Antony. I’ll cover for you at work. I’m sure Jim will understand.”

My breath becomes shallower and I can barely cry. The others get dressed around me and leave for work. They can't help it. They don't know why. But, as my blood seeps around me and the colours of my flat become fuzzy, white, and eventually black, I do.

#