

Bugs Under the Skin

It's raining. I stand facing the faded old door of room 103 at the Beaumont Motel, where I was told to come. With shaking hands, I open the rusting doorknob and find myself engulfed in an abyss where the room should be. As soon as my fingers reach for a light switch, a deep and monotonous voice resonates from the dark.

"The room light doesn't need to be on. We can use the lamp." At that moment, a dim light reaches from the far corner of the room like fingers grasping at the walls. The figure sitting under the lamp is a large man, wearing aged jeans and a thick brown jacket. His face remains concealed by the shadow cast from the lamp.

Again, his voice fills the room, "Take a seat on the bed."

Keeping my eyes on the man, I shift my way over to the bed and plant myself. My eyes follow him as he stands up and takes two heavy steps to the desk sitting opposite the bed.

"You want those bugs in you to disappear, right?"

"Yes, sir," is the answer I manage to choke out through a dry and constrained throat. At this, the man removes a small paper bag from the desk and tosses it on the bed next to me. Out of it rolls a small vial filled with tiny white pellets.

"Take one of these next time they come back. You should only have to take the rest for a few months afterward. Soon enough, no more bugs. And remember to leave your payment before you leave." I nod and fumble through my bag for the 300 dollars agreed upon before the meeting.

Placing the money on the bed, I hastily grab the bag and begin my exit before my panic becomes too palpable. Just as I step from the motel room to the pavement outside, the room once

again becomes swallowed in an impenetrable darkness, as if disappearing from reality. I feel tempted to look back, but I just shut the door.

Morning. Thick red velvet curtains block out any light that could possibly attempt to permeate into my room. I open my eyes to the familiar sight of gray walls stained by the remains of generations of insect corpses. Clothes are piled up in every corner of the room like massive anthills. This unfortunately familiar sight encourages me to return to sleep, but any chance of rest is disrupted when I feel the brush of six tiny legs just below my skin. Mandibles begin tugging from inside me, and my skin starts to rip open. Hundreds of black beetle-like creatures pour out of my chest and form a bloody-broth soup as they swarm my body and eat it alive. They consume and defile me. I jump up from my bed and slam myself into my dresser, swatting away at the army of bugs to reach the bottle of pills inside the paper bag.

I reach for the bottle and fumble to open the cap. Eventually, it pops off and I manage to grab a chalky white pill. There's no time for a glass of water. I close my eyes and swallow it, but as soon as it starts its journey through the esophagus, I feel something bigger coming back up. A bloated, slimy bug falls from my mouth to the floor along with the pill. I can't even swallow anymore. I resolve myself and grab the pill from the floor, placing it on my tongue and swallowing as fast as my body will allow. This time, nothing comes up. It went down. I close my eyes and wait for it to kick in, and soon enough the crawling sensation ceases, and I find myself clear of any more insects. Something feels wrong, though. There's no way it worked that well.

Right at that moment, there's a knock at the door. I jump and look at the thin rivers of blood streaming from the numerous bites I suffered. I have to cover this. Running to the closet, a large black hoodie presents itself to me. I sling it over me and run to the front door. Cracking it

open, a blinding beam of sunlight peaks through so that I have to squint. Just barely, I can see the silhouette of my best friend.

“Hey! Can I come in?”

“Yeah, get in quick, it's bright out there.”

“Okay?” They squeeze through the cracked door and close it behind them, turning to look back at me. I’m staring blankly at the pristine checkered floor, connected to the neatly decorated and freshly painted walls of my apartment’s entrance.

“Hey! You in there?” They ask. I look up.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah, hey! I haven’t seen you in weeks! Want a drink or somethin?” I flash a quick smile and walk to the kitchen.

They follow closely behind and answer quietly, “Sure, just water, I guess. But like, I was just worried because you kept bailing on all our plans.”

“Yeah I’m sorry, I’ve been super busy lately. Next time, though, for sure!” I try to keep an upbeat energy, but they don't seem convinced.

“Uh-huh... busy cleaning?” They mutter as they look around the freshly dusted kitchen. While they’re focused on that, I take a moment to scratch at my arm, but I feel the piercing sensation of their eyes darting towards my arm. I move my hands to my pockets.

“In between work and everything else, yeah. Was there something you wanted to talk about?” I begin to sense there’s something more to this visit.

“Oh, yeah. I just needed to see you. Like, physically see you. You haven’t been around anyone we know in weeks, so we’re kinda worried for you.”

“I’m fine! Just work is all. I’ve been getting overtime to pay for some unexpected expenses, you know?” Saying this, I hand my friend a tall glass of water. As I do, they push it back towards me.

“I think you need that more than me. You look like death.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I can tell something’s up and you *clearly* need help because you’re not helping yourself!”

“Oh, so that’s what you came here for. To convince me to ‘get help’ again. I think you should leave.”

“Not unless you promise to talk to someone, anyone.”

“Okay- yeah, fine. Just go. Now.” I say, rushing to the door to usher them out. Once they’re on the other side of the entrance, I begin closing the door.

“Promise you’ll call once you start feeling better, alright?” They say, stopping the door with their foot.

“Yeah, sure,” I mutter out quickly before showing off the same smile I did just a few minutes earlier. I slam the door shut before they have time to respond. I sink to the floor and sigh.

Maybe I really do need the help. It feels like there’s someone inside of me that just needs to force their way out, like a butterfly from a cocoon. If the pills don’t work, I’ll listen to my friend. But maybe, just maybe, the butterfly will wake up soon. I close my eyes and start to feel a heavy drowsiness wrapped itself around my body. Must be a side effect of those pills. I try to make it to the couch in time, but I’m held down to the floor by the chains of sleep before I reach it.

Nighttime. I open my eyes to a pitch-black void, one vaguely shaped like my living room. Yet, instead of the pure darkness I usually find myself in every night, it has been permeated by the softest glow of a warm, orange street lamp peering through the windows I forgot to shutter. I raise myself from the floor and go to close them, but as I do, I'm drawn in by the light. For once, it feels comforting. Instead of closing the window shutters, I find myself lifting them to peer into the soft gleam. When I do, I'm faced with a faint reflection of myself. It's me, but something is off.

Edges of my skin look chipped and peeled like old paint. I have to be seeing things. I pinch one of the smaller skin peelings and begin to gently pull it. I feel the entire layer of skin lifted off my body from the top of my head to below my chin, and as it is. The smallest insect crawls out from under it and off of my body. I start to peel feverishly. I grab handfuls of skin and violently rip from head to toe. It burns like a righteous fire burning away the infection I've contracted. With each patch of the organ removed, I feel what could have been thousands of those horrible bugs migrate from out of my body and into the deepest crevices of the world where they truly belong, leaving me forever in this cleansing flesh ritual.

After all loose skin is removed, I look back at my reflection in the mirror. It's me. Not the me that existed minutes ago, but the ideal me. The one that was always meant to be.

Five months later. I've stayed on the pills since that day, and I've been able to remain as myself. I've completely re-decorated and cleaned my bedroom, and there hasn't been a bug in sight. On multiple occasions, I've passed by a few of my friends, but none of them recognized me. Maybe I'll introduce myself one day.

