

BUGCHASER

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She writes her number down at the bar after you serve her a perfect martini, says you can come find her at the club when you knock off work. You follow her scent along the street, into the subway, into an alley, down a fire escape, into the pit of sweaty bodies. You follow her through the elbows and speakers and lights and ice cubes and stilettos and chins, slicing through the crowd 'til you're right up close. When she comes out of the toilet you're waiting for her. She grasps this big tall bastard and speaks real intimately into his ear. He turns his back on you, shielding her, and she vines him with her legs. She thinks you'll give up, thinks you won't chase her. She's wrong.

The DJ is kilometres away, playing a song made from car alarms and sirens and trumpets sped up a thousand times. You have the jar of tips with you to spend on drinks, the jar from the bar — it's rightfully yours — Bounce never splits it up fairly anyway, and you buy a bottle of Polish vodka over the counter with coins and sip your stinging liquor and study the forest of humans. It's thrilling to pursue the one fuck in a hundred that'll leach the virus onto you and have your blood turn thin and clear like water as the leukocytes breed in their microscopic orgy. Sound sexy to you, the bugchaser, the roach, the unclean devourer. This entire club could be a culture of viral blood — except not that many people carry the virus these days. It's only in these clubs — basements beneath basements — that there's a chance of hitting a live one as you go about your minesweeping.

The health authorities have people standing on street corners hawking vaccines like tabloid newspapers: *GETCHA CURE HERE*. So many people have their immunity worked out that it alienates everyone else who just wants a little fun, a little risk. There are thousands of fakers who splash themselves with makeup to look sickly and white and skeletal. Plus there are hundreds of bugchasers hoping if they writhe around in enough fluids they'll hit the jackpot and catch the virus and end their life spectacularly. People like you keep the virus alive.

The liquor makes the minutes melt as you resolve to go back and pull the girl out of the darkness of the club. Vera — that's her name: Vera. You think you see, briefly, the jug-ears of that big tall motherfucker she clung to. Yup, that's definitely him, over by the machine that sells condoms with

holes in 'em, and you can see his white face-paint is covering up a big + tattoo on his neck. Pozzies, Pluses, Positives: they're everywhere, some genuine, some fake. Only way of knowing is when your body starts disintegrating one Sunday morning.

You pull your phone out and use the light on it to try and see Vera's number, written on that floppy credit card receipt you made her etch on, and you punch the number into your phone.

unst, unst, unst.

You spot a black stick-figure holding a glowing phone to its face, a phone with pale makeup caked on it, and you get up close behind her. You get a sneaky punch into the big, tall bastard she's with and he folds.

unst, unst, unst.

She steps in to protect Lurch and you squeeze against her in a gap so tight she can't flee. She's trying to knee you in the groin but she can't, she's too skinny and weak and viral and her black, panda-eye-rings are dribbling.

Her earrings look really big compared with her horseshoe collar bone that her heavy head almost wobbles. She has black crescents under her eyelids thick and wide like overturned macchiato cups. Her flesh is skim milk — you can see the skeleton underneath — and those cheekbones? Like a skull, you swear to God, a talking skull. You shout right at her face: "LOVE VIRUS. Yeah?"

Her head and her chin are nodding, though it could be the *unst, unst, unst*. You tug her hand and she shrugs and lets her legs move. She's going with you. This is really happening. Sex dirty enough to die – if she's really a Poz.

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You both crash into her door frame and the world stops spinning. Her keys keep falling out of her hand.

"Getcha pants off," she says in the lounge. "Be with you in a tick."

She barricades herself in the bathroom and you can hear some liquid pouring into the toilet. You think you hear pills rattling in a bottle then a gulp and the sound of the cap being screwed back on.

She emerges. "Go wait in the bedroom."

“You should’ve popped those bad boys at the club. Got one for me? What do they do?”

“None of your business. Bedroom.”

You begin to move a bit but her framed photos are distracting you. There’s one with a guy with his arms proudly around her like he’s built her himself, but that man makes only one other appearance, holding a baby — one of those real little wrapped-up ones like a loaf of bread. The way the dude looks at that baby, you can tell it’s his. Her baby, though? Unclear. And no signs of her looking sick in any photos.

“I’m not convinced you’ve thought this through,” she says as you knock back a mouthful of alcohol you find on her night stand, wiping the back of your hand across your lips. “You picked up anyone in that place before?”

“I’m down with a little Russian Roulette. Are you, though?”

Her bed is a lake of black silk, too expansive for just one woman. People with The Virus fuck like crazy before they die, they know they’re spreading it, they want everyone else in the city to be in the same situation as they are, to party to death with them.

She sits on the edge of her bed and wipes her makeup off, then rolls onto her front. Her knobbly spine looks like wood blocks in pantyhose. You put a towel down. When you’ve had a thousand people — possessed them; rubbed your skin against theirs — then you will retire from it all. A legend. A gasped rumour. A man-myth. You just need to get those numbers up.

You push her head into the pillows and try to finish and get out of there as quickly as you can.

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“You’re big-time late. Manager’s looking for you.”

He’s going to fire your ass — partly for the smart mouth; partly the lateness; partly cause everyone on the payroll has to be vaccinated by law. Anyway, bosses don’t want employees’ stomachs melting out their anuses in a kitchen. It fucks up their hygiene rating when the council inspector comes round.

Trying to pour a beer, the bar shifts under your glass, so you hold it good and tight. When did the bar turn into a galleon and set sail on jagged seas? The room tips and lurches all over the place. You shouldn’t’ve stayed over at

that Pozzie's house, shouldn't've gulped pills with her, had tequila for breakfast, vodka for brunch, sucked each others necks in the shower. You convince yourself you'll leave earlier next time. Don't get attached. It sucks the energy out of a man.

Bored behind the bar, you start tapping the rhythm of the song the deej has on. It becomes afternoon and you own this place; your blood is muscular; your moves are stylish. The bottles are swaying all over the place and it's hard to get the sharp brown liquid into the glass. You go to pour yourself a schnapps but the big furry hand of Bounce wrenches the bottle off you.

"Manager says you should come back when you've had a wash and a shave," Bounce says. "I concur, bromео."

"Let go, Bounce. My shift, my rules. Get back on the door, anyone could come in."

"I oughta twist your arm, Mr I'm-Too-Cool-To-Answer-My-Phone. I oughta break it a little. See if that virus-goo comes out of your sickly ass."

Bounce thinks he's the city's conscience. He's from the tropics and he goes to church on Saturdays.

You shatter an ice cube between your teeth cockily.

"What you're doin' is disgusting, just so you know," he goes on. "Everyone knows the clubs you been going to. You're a flippin' animal. Do the right thing, Cockroach Boy. Get a checkup. Get botha yous a checkup. Call it a double-date."

"I ain't even seeing her again. Shows what the fuck you know."

He squeezes your shoulder like you're a little kid. You envision punching him hard in the guts, but your hand would probably shatter like the ice cube. What's that shit that makes your bones strong? Carbon? Whatever it is, you don't have enough in you. You get whatever vitamins and minerals are in lemons and limes and liquor, plus whatever protein you can suck off a stranger's tongue.

"Brother, you're not a bad man, even a flippin' bro on a good day. Don't risk yourself. Get the jab, will ya?"

You're so pissed off you go stack kegs and clean the hoses and load the dishwasher and stay the fuck away from Bounce, then when your shift has five minutes to go, you untie your apron and sprint.

Bounce yells out as you jump over the velvet rope and run past the heat lamps and the line of people in tight pants and you stumble and the bottle of schnapps tumbles out of your sock and makes that horrible cracking sound of wasted booze.

Will Vera be at the club, sashaying through people, sniffing you out? You deliberately didn't wear your black jeans today 'cause her number's in the pocket on that stupidass scrap of receipt paper. She's been ringing, doing irritating motherly stuff, offering to launder your clothes, dust your bookcases, annoying wholesome shit like that.

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ImmYOUNe is stashed down a narrow alley stacked head-high with black bags of garbage. A lot of people are sitting on the dumpsters sucking syringes full of blood or squirting them into each's mouths. Some people are inside the dumpsters, texting, smoking, wearing clothes suitable only for shredding, trying to speed up their deaths from cold or flu or exposure.

A nipping wind gives you the balls to sprint past the bouncers and into the throng. You pull off your work shirt and fling it towards a ceiling, dribbling with condensed sweat like a jungle canopy. There are pools of reflective liquid on the ground leaking from intravenous tubes and catheter bags, some red and some white, and you slip and take your shoes off and throw them into a brazier. People are squelching, squirming, grinding, slurping each other's lips. People are sixty-nining right there on the ground, merging their ribs. Your cock pulsates with the music, screaming metal sped up 300bpm, songs about the apocalypse.

Something is jabbing your foot, broken glass, right? You move on but what's holding you won't let go. You raise your foot and extract a needle with about a third blood left in it. It's fun to squirt on some guy. He says thanks, rouges his cheeks with it and licks his red lips.

There's a bar in the corner. The girl serving drinks has petri dishes glued over her nipples. You buy an entire bottle of something poisonous with your last credit card, some cracked thing with your ex-wife's name on it. You put the bottle of sticky, fiery chemicals to your lips and let the napalm burn your guts. You pour alcohol over your head and people suck it off your earlobes.

They slurp your tongue out, bite your nipples, suck your cock. Someone bites your jugular so hard you're sure it's going to spray like a garden hose and this can all end here — hell, heaven, Hades — wherever this place is.

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She comes in at the start of another shift you're trying to sleepwalk through, wearing a big fat dress under her hoodie. You try to look away. There have been a lot of women since her, whatever the fuck her name was. A lot of men, too. A lot of fluids.

Bounce whistles as the woman comes in. You've spent a lot of the past month trying to convince him to screw church and come bugchasing with you. You've tried to convince him his religion is a club everyone can get into, day or night, no dress code, no cover charge. Come with me, you tell him, grinning at the cunt, lying and smiling. He has too much pride to survive the minefields you drag yourself through.

She places her hands on the bar top, tries to catch your eyes. "I just wanted you to know that the test came back positive."

"Venus," you say, and it sounds wrong. "No, it's not – Viola — Vera, I mean."

She is wearing some kind of a blanket or shawl. She has on a woollen hat with ear flaps but you see clues that her black hair has grown back twice as thick. This is the first time you've seen her without face paint on. She's like a black and white movie that's been colourised, and it's not quite right.

"I'm getting rid of it."

"D'you want a drink or something? You're not really looking for, like, a monogamous, y'know... What do you want, anyway?"

"You left your shirt at mine. I ironed it for you." She slides a paper bag onto the bar top.

"Listen, I'm not really into the whole attachment...Look, you gonna buy a drink or not?"

Her staunch blue eyes dribbling, she pulls open the flaps of her black coat. "Do I look like I should be drinking?!" She storms towards the lady-toilets.

"And don't be comin' back!" you yell after her. "Go getchaself a transfusion."

Bounce lets go of the toilet door he's been holding open for her. You break eye contact first, damn it. "She can't hear you, son. She's in there throwing up."

"All yours, if you want her."

"You broke it, you bought it," Bounce goes and cracks his knuckles. "You're lookin' at your future right there."

"Fuck you, Bounce. I didn't even catch nothing off her."

"You been catching feelings. That's what I reckon."

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Word is getting around. Bounce says there are people coming up to him, asking if this is a Bug Bar, officially, as in registered under the Health Code and stuff. *Does that skinny guy work here? Mr Deathwish, with the blue crescents under his eyes?*

Some dance parties last two moons and a sun. You go into a stall, lock the door, sleep for an hour sitting up, hugging the rear of the toilet, your head resting on a roll of TP, then you tumble back into the party.

Bugchasers can't tell what one another looks like in the dark, there is no welcome, no warmth. You are greasy all the time, stinking, bathing in jizz and fishy juice, scabbed up, bony. You get forced to do a blood test bought at an all-night convenience store. Underground, TranceFuzion, Rhesus. Spazm. RegURGEt8. They keep the light off your skin. You never feel rain or hear wind any more. You're in someone's bathroom now, washing your twitching, dry eyes. There are white puddles on the ground, and a Band-aid. You have a guy fucking you and it hurts but in the centre of the pain is a new dimension, an undiscovered colour.

You slump into the man's car. You're going to live with them forever, apparently. He pukes words into your ear which have strange barbs and curves to them, comic book speech bubbles. You'd lash out, punch and kick, if you didn't think you'd disintegrate.

"Chasing rabbits or roaches?" one of them asks, and holds your head and another one parts your lips with his tongue and slips a tablet of baking soda into your vinegar head and it bubbles up and your ears snap and pop. You are made of clouds and you can enter buildings through the top floor. Your cash

card is declined. They give you a thick roll of cash. You are on your knees in a bedroom. Someone places a heavy coat over you and you can't shake it off. You're on your knees, offering your arse up to the party, and every time you try to move, your spine is extracted and shoved into your back and your tailbone aches.

They produce a wire brush and gently hold your balls to the side while they scrub you raw and you cry into the carpet. The ravaged flesh has an increased risk of infection. You dab a finger in the juices leaking from you and it's pinkish-clear and thin and sticky as fruit juice and beg the party people to take you to the all-night AE. After eight days without a sleep or shower, your brain shuts down.

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You come to in a white room. Must be heaven. Finally other colours announce themselves. The bio-medical waste bucket is bright yellow. The box full of bandages is clear. The exit sign is green. The nurse wears a uniform trimmed with blue. She says she won't unstrap you. Some of your tears almost get on her skin and she darts back and squirts sterilising foam on her hands and scrubs her arms, and you insist that you're not Positive, you're not not not not not.

"You still require the test," she says, "as part of our policy here."

"What about my things?" you go.

"What things? You didn't even have clothes on."

You're allowed to roam while they test your blood. With almost unbearable flashes of lightning-pain coming from between your cheeks, you waddle like a penguin through sixty corridors that all look identical. You take the elevator to numbers you've never imagined. You find a floor that says Birthing Unit and you collapse and the stand holding up your IV bag falls over. The nurses ask you who they need to call, and you pat the pocket in your hospital gown, pulling out your credit card receipt and holding it up like something you found at the back of your throat. The date of the receipt is still printed in neat black type and you squint as you try to read it. You haven't had white light on you for what, God, one month, two months... counting...

The receipt says you got Vera's number eight months and four weeks ago and... no... Nine months, it adds up to. Her number has faded away. The nurse helps you into a seat, and you sit outside the birthing unit and wait for someone to wheel her out.