

BUGGED

Written by

Peter Sreckovic

Petersreckovic@gmail.com

OPEN ON:

EXT. DOWNTOWN TORONTO -- NIGHT

Urban chaos. A knock-off Time's Square through the lens of an acid trip.

The city setting is twisted like a carnival mirror. Crowds of distorted faces passing before the blinding flare of neon signs and digital billboards. Sounds are delayed, amplified.

At the centre of the madness is MARINA STOJKOVIC (31). Her typically bookish, vaguely European look, overshadowed by her distress.

Her hair is a bird nest. Eyes wide with fear. The world shifts in a blur around her. She spins... frantically taking it all in.

Her eyes lock onto something in the distance.

A loud SCREECHING builds - only for Marina's ears - SCREECHING like an old dial-up modem labouring to connect to the internet.

Marina holds her head in agony as the wail slices through her brain, breathing heavily as the noise and the pain climbs.

She's eclipsed by the massive billboards.

...And their messages.

The typical range of ads you would see downtown. Except the words aren't advertising headlines. Far from it. Each is identical.

"HOT LOCAL SINGLES ARE IN YOUR AREA"
"HOT LOCAL SINGLES ARE IN YOUR AREA"
"HOT LOCAL SINGLES ARE IN YOUR AREA"
"HOT LOCAL SINGLES ARE IN YOUR AREA"
"HOT LOCAL SINGLES ARE IN YOUR AREA"

CUT TO BLACK.

BLACKNESS

From beyond the void a MAN speaks, his voice old and rough with a hint of a Slavic accent --

VOICE
Just close your eyes. And breath.

We hear ragged, forced BREATHING - the kind that catches and rattles in the throat, painful to listen to, let alone experience.

Through the darkness, the breather struggles until...

The sharp INHALE of a puffer brings relief.

INT. UNIVERSITY HALL -- BATHROOM -- DAY

In the spacious public bathroom, Marina leans on the sink, as her breathing slowly returns to normal.

She wears the deep-set shadows under her eyes of a workaholic.

Water runs from the tap.

INT. COMPUTER LAB -- FIVE MINUTES PREVIOUS

Small. Plain. Overrun by tech.

Before a massive projector screen is Marina's test subject - BRANDON (20), a plucky second-year student here for the cash.

He wears an EEG cap - a helmet-shaped nest of electrodes positioned around a plastic base, wires running across it like cobwebs, a spine of cables running down his neck.

The helmet has seen better days. It's cutting edge now blunt.

Marina analyses data from her own screen. Where Brandon's brain waves are broken out - Delta, Theta, Alpha, Beta and Gamma.

MARINA

Alright. Let's try it again.

A word prompt appears on the screen. Brandon's eyes flick to the left.

ON MARINA'S SCREEN: The brainwave data blips and freezes. A malfunction. The window closes.

MARINA (CONT'D)

Shit...

BRANDON

All good?

Marina types away furiously. Not answering.

KNOCK KNOCK

Marina jumps.

Next to the glass window is a trio of researchers. The LEAD taps his watch, impatient.

MARINA
(muttering)
Just a minute...

Marina refocuses on her screen.

BRANDON
Everything good?

KNOCK KNOCK.

Another tap on the glass.

Marina pounds at the keys, irritation growing. Senses overloaded.

BRANDON (CONT'D)
Are we done???

KNOCK KNOCK

INT. UNIVERSITY HALL -- BATHROOM -- NIGHT

Marina leans on the sink. Regaining her breath as the water continues to run. She shuts it off.

INT. STOJKOVIC APARTMENT -- NIGHT

Homely and quaint. Tchotchkes and dollies abundant.

Marina drops her bag and pulls off her jacket. Opening the closet she spots --

A box shoved to the back. Inside is a GASMASK, goggles, gloves, and full body coveralls.

Marina stares at them. Uncomfortable. Closes the door.

INT. MARINA'S ROOM -- NIGHT

Marina boots up her desktop computer.

It's an impressive piece of machinery - blue light pours out of the base blanketing the dark room in its glow. Flanked by 2 state of the art monitors with keyboard and mouse to match.

This isn't just a computer. This is her LIFE.

As it hums to life, Marina props her phone on a mini-tripod, dictating to the camera.

MARINA

Marina Stojkovic, PhD candidate,
University of Toronto. April 17th.
8:54pm.

B.C.I. test 18 was unsuccessful due
to equipment malfunction.

Addition concerns about the
execution of my code. Likely will
need reworking.

She turns off the camera.

MARINA'S ROOM -- LATER

Marina stares blankly at her monitor, lost in the abyss of her code. An open can of Redbull sits within arms reach.

Marina is stuck.

The clock strikes 5:00.

Breaking from her trance, Marina rubs her eyes.

HALLWAY

Marina tiptoes down the hall and pokes her head into her parents room.

Goran sleeps snugly, snoring. Stanka's side of the bed is still empty.

MARINA'S ROOM

Marina pulls the door shut. Locks it.

She grabs a towel off a chair by the door and tucks it against the base of the door - blocking the gap.

Crawling into bed she pulls open the window next to her.

As she turns out the light she's met with a FLASH.

SUDDENLY every surface is crawling with INSECTS.

Marina's breath catches in her throat. The same ragged, painful breathing as before. She fumbles for her puffer in the dark, bugs swarming.

INHALE

The lights flick on. No insects. Her panic fades.

INT. STOJKOVIC APARTMENT -- DAY

At the breakfast table, Marina is buried in her laptop, food an afterthought.

Beyond her untouched plate are her parents: the picture of Balkan Gothic.

STANKA (58) - Overbearing. Matriarchal. Dressed for work in the sort of full-length green jumpsuit that only heavy-duty cleaning personnel wear, her hospital badge confirms it.

And GORAN (61) - large, imposing, and silent. Something is off about him... he's not entirely present.

Stanka watches Marina - focused on her laptop. Committing the sin of ignoring food.

STANKA

It's like you want to live in there
ah?

No answer. Marina is in the zone.

STANKA (CONT'D)

Can you take a break and eat
something please?

Marina eats a forkful, eyes never leaving the screen.

Her mom sighs.

STANKA (CONT'D)

Marina...

MARINA

I need to get this done.

Stanka sighs. Not worth the fight.

STANKA
How was your night?

MARINA
Fine.

STANKA
You had a date? With Kara
Philipovic's son?

MARINA
No. I was working.

STANKA
Ahhh? I thought it was a date?

Silence. It's like pulling teeth.

STANKA (CONT'D)
Marina?

MARINA
I had to reschedule.

STANKA
And did you 'reschedule'?

Silence. Marina pretends not to have heard. Stanka scowls.

STANKA (CONT'D)
What am I going to tell Kara
Philipovic?

MARINA
Tell her whatever you want.

Marina gets up and shuts her laptop.

MARINA (CONT'D)
I gotta to go.

To Stanka's dismay, her plate of food has barely been
touched.

The door closes. Stanka sighs.

EXT. CAMPUS -- DAY

Marina strides across campus on her phone. Ignoring everyone
and everything around her. Lost in her own world.

INT. TUTORIAL ROOM -- DAY

One large table. A dozen chairs. A half-dozen 1st year students left waiting.

Marina enters a small classroom in a huff.

MARINA
(mumbling)
Sorry guys.

Out comes her laptop - opening it to obscure the rest of the room. A barrier.

AN HOUR LATER

Marina collects papers from the 1st Years. One of them - CARTER (19) - tall, athletic - smiles at her as he tops the stack.

CARTER
See ya.

Marina ignores him. Eyes glued to the table.

INT. CAMPUS BUILDING -- DAY

Marina cuts through the throngs of other students... past pockets of friends. Inserting her headphones to drown it all out.

But something does catch her eye. She stops in her tracks.

Across the atrium is a BALD MAN wearing a white lab coat. She only catches a glimpse before he disappears into the crowd.

INT. CAFETERIA -- DAY

Packed with students. The chatter unbearable. Marina scans for an empty spot... somewhere secluded. No luck.

INT. SERVER ROOM -- DAY

Row after row of servers, like an endless line of glowing dominos.

Marina sits on the floor on her laptop, blanketed by blue light in the endless, vacuous room.

She takes a bite of her sandwich.

INT. ATRIUM -- DAY

Marina speaks to an unseen crowd. For the first time we see her come to life. Invigorated, passionate!

MARINA

The next step in human cognition is seamless fusion with technology. No longer devices that we use, but ones that are part of our very being. I dream of the day when I can download PDFs straight into my prefrontal cortex and have them processed to my hippocampus in an instant.

Knowledge will become table stakes. Languages will come in booster packs you buy before a trip.

A Bachelor's degree will take 2 hours, instead of 4 years.

And all of it will be available to purchase on the app store.

Brain-Computer Interface is at an infantile stage, but with my thesis I'm looking to take the next step in a movement that will redefine life as we know it!

She pauses, waiting for a response from what must surely be a rapturous crowd --

But all she gets is silence from the scattered students at a poster conference. Disinterested they move on, mixing into the crowd flowing between posters and a nearby coffee shop.

Disappointed, Marina turns to see NATHAN LANG (30) - tall, Chinese, as charming as he is brilliant - chatting up a large group in front of his own poster. Mostly girls.

Marina quickly breaks her gaze. Mood spoiled further.

MOMENTS LATER

The poster conference carries on. Students and Professors alike crawling over PhD's like ants over food.

Marina strikes a lonely figure. Buried in her phone as the room continues to buzz. People bouncing from one to another like hornets. Moving unnaturally quickly.

BUZZ BUZZ

A notification appears on her phone.

"URGENT: DEPARTMENT OF COMPUTER SCIENCE MEETING. 3:00PM"

INT. CLASS ROOM -- DAY

The room is already packed with the department of computer science as Marina enters.

Searching for a spot, she sees Nathan, who's eyes lock onto her. She averts his gaze and sits as far from him as she can.

At the front are PROFESSOR SINGH (49). Short. Indian. Brilliant. And manically energetic.

...And two other department heads.

...Sitting before them are a cluster of PhDs and grad students - all men other than Marina. The lone female presence in the room.

PROFESSOR SINGH

Thank you all for joining us so last minute. We thought it was best to address this issue head on and try to answer any questions you may have.

The PhD students exchange glances.

PROFESSOR SINGH (CONT'D)

First, we wanted to inform you that Professor Fieldheimer will be leaving the University at the end of the semester. You may still see him around the building until then, but he has been relieved of all official duties as of now. I wish I could say more, but it involves an active legal matter.

Whispers from the students.

PROFESSOR SINGH (CONT'D)

Which brings us to the good news. With Professor Fieldheimer's position now vacant, we will be taking on a new associate professor in the fall.

(MORE)

PROFESSOR SINGH (CONT'D)

The department has been encourage
to look internally for this
appointment following the defense
of your dissertations.

Looks are exchanged. Marina perks up, fire in her eyes.

PROFESSOR SINGH (CONT'D)

We will now take any questions that
you have.

INT. HALLWAY -- DAY

Practically running, Marina arrives at the digital sign-up
sheet outside of her computer lab.

Scanning the QR code, she flips through the schedule.

ON HER PHONE

Booked solid. Scheduled wall to wall for weeks. She scrolls
down. Even the graveyard shifts are taken.

INT. STOJKOVIC APARTMENT -- NIGHT

Marina rushes in, dumping her stuff and heading for her room.

Unaware, she passes an overturned glass on the kitchen
counter. Trapped under this crystal prison is a fly.

INT. MARINA'S ROOM

Head in hands, Marina peers through her fingers at her code.
It all feels hopeless.

With a deep breath, she composes herself.

MONTAGE -- MARINA AT WORK

Marina pours over her code.

She scribbles ideas on a pad of paper.

Paces back and forth.

Blasts some heavy metal music, drumming her fingers on the
table... eyes scanning.

THEN Inspiration slaps her across the face.

Her fingers fly across the keyboard like Glenn Gould at the piano - Glenn Gould playing Slayer.

Guzzling Redbull. Oil for her machine. One. Two. Three. Empty cans litter the desk.

CODE

...spills across her monitor. White and coloured text across black. Dense and seemingly endless.

The sun peaks through the curtains.

MARINA

...scans her work for mistakes. Alternating between the her dissertation and window of code.

She leans back in her tattered chair. Tired, but very pleased with herself.

PAGE AFTER PAGE

Flies off the school printer.

INT. UNIVERSITY PRINT CENTER -- DAY

Marina waits anxiously. Grabbing each individual page as it comes off the printer.

INT. PROFESSOR SINGH'S OFFICE -- DAY

Professor Singh's office. The room looks like a legacy to the history of computing. Nothing is out of place.

MARINA

Professor-

She stops. Not Professor Singh, but-

Nathan waiting at the desk.

NATHAN

Hey... He just stepped out.

(adding)

You know him. He basically runs on code. The clock strikes 10am and it's time to execute...

He laughs awkwardly.

Marina doesn't react, turning to exit.

NATHAN (CONT'D)

You can wait with me if you want-

Marina is already gone.

INT. HALLWAY -- DAY

Marina waits in the hall outside the open door. Fragments of conversation filter out.

Nathan exits - Marina makes sure to keep her head down.

INT. PROFESSOR SINGH'S OFFICE

Professor Singh looks up over the thick document.

PROFESSOR SINGH

What exactly are the changes?

MARINA

My code. Pages 5 through 8, 13, 58,
and 76 through 85, with a
substantial overhaul to allow for
increase signal capacity, clarity
and speed.

She gestures to the pages as she recites them from memory.

MARINA (CONT'D)

And I modified the write up to
explain exactly how to overcome the
issues we discussed.

PROFESSOR SINGH

And your practical evidence?

MARINA

At the moment... none. Yet. but-

He cuts her off.

PROFESSOR SINGH

Marina. Marina. Please. Spare us
this argument.

He pauses.

PROFESSOR SINGH (CONT'D)
This is great.

He taps the thick document.

Marina swells with pride.

PROFESSOR SINGH (CONT'D)
-Or it would be great. If it was
the plot of an Asimov novel.

...Then deflates.

PROFESSOR SINGH (CONT'D)
We practice computer science.
Without practical evidence this has
as much validity as a BuzzFeed
article. It's fascinating. I love
to read it. But it's baseless,
useless, clickbait.

MARINA
My new code shows-

PROFESSOR SINGH
-Your code. Your code is great I'm
sure. But what you're proposing is
something the world has never seen
before.

Marina grows defensive.

MARINA
Isn't that the point?

PROFESSOR SINGH
Of course it is. But the typical
Brain computer interface project
deals with moving robotic arms and
typing 90 characters per minute,
meanwhile you're not only proposing
seamless flow from brain to
computer, but also from computer to
brain.

MARINA
Elon Musk has pigs playing video
games... transferring data from
computer directly into the brain is
just a matter of time.

PROFESSOR SINGH
Marina. Marina. Marina. You're not
listening to me.

(MORE)

PROFESSOR SINGH (CONT'D)

Musk may have pigs playing games
but you're trying to make them fly.

Marina rolls her eyes.

PROFESSOR SINGH (CONT'D)

Let me put it like this. You're
trying to pitch the iPhone in the
60's. You can't just make claims.
You need to spoon-feed it to us.
Without seeing some sort of
practical application you're going
to get laughed out of the room next
month.

Marina scowls.

PROFESSOR SINGH (CONT'D)

Perhaps one day you'll be right,
but not right now. I'm sorry to say
it, but 'this'-

He taps the cover of her dissertation again.

PROFESSOR SINGH (CONT'D)

...is science fiction.

INT. UNIVERSITY HALLWAY -- DAY

Marina tails Professor Singh, passing students and staff on
their way.

MARINA

I'm confident that I can produce
practical evidence but I need more
funding, lab time. The latest
equipment.

PROFESSOR SINGH

We've discussed this ad nauseam.
You know we're capped for the year.

MARINA

So what am I supposed to do then?
Without a functioning EEG the
department is essentially leaving
me out to dry.

The pair stop outside of Professor Singh's lecture hall.

PROFESSOR SINGH

Even if we could pull together the funds, the department is selective about where that money goes. It needs to be worth the risk...

And I'm sorry, but I don't see it.

He enters the lecture hall, leaving Marina defeated.

INT. COMPUTER LAB

Waiting in the hall beyond the glass walls, Marina slinks into the lab as a trio of researchers exits.

Crosses to the bench where shelves of tech, spare parts, and cables live in a perpetual state of chaos.

She digs out the EEG helmet. And immediately sees an issue:

A number of electrodes have been torn out, wires frayed. Sabotage.

In anger, Marina chucks the useless helmet back onto the bench.

INT. MARINA'S ROOM -- DAY

At her command station, Marina shifts through tabs.

ON THE SCREEN

...Is a NEW EEG cap - looking like a diamond tiara compared to the previous one.

State-of-the-art tech with a state-of-the-art price.

"\$19,999.00."

Marina grimaces.

DING

Marina shifts tabs as a new email appears.

"APPLY FOR CREDIT INCREASE DENIED"

MARINA

...sinks in her chair, defeat washing over her.

Not sulking for long, a thought strikes her, rebounding quickly and sitting up-

She rifles through her desk drawer, extracting a notebook. Spins through the pages, landing on an orderly list of passwords and usernames.

She scans the list until she finds...

"MOM'S ONLINE BANKING"

FLASHBACK

An exasperated Stanka hovers over Marina at the computer.

STANKA

If I need a bank why not walk to
the bank?

MARINA'S ROOM

With a few key strokes Marina is logged into her mom's financial hub. She hovers her mouse over a button "APPLY FOR LINE OF CREDIT", unsure.

The guilt weighs on her. She closes the tab instead.

Just then from the other room:

STANKA (O.S.)

Marina! Your cousin is here!

INT. STOJKOVIC APARTMENT -- MOMENTS LATER

The large table is laden with traditional Serbian food - Sarma, cevapi, sliced meat, salted pork, and more.

Around the table are Marina, Stanka, and Goran along with...

Her cousin SONJA (30), radiating confidence, stunningly beautiful with a 1-year old BABY on her hip.

And ANA (57) Sonja's mom (Stanka's sister) - chatty, a drama magnet, her life's mission is to patronize anyone who isn't her offspring.

Sprinting around the room in the background is BOGDAN (4), Sonja's hyperactive son.

SONJA
 (in Serbian)
*You know he's very energetic. But
 it's good.*

ANA
 (in Serbian)
*They're applying for Bogdan to
 enter a gifted program at school.*

STANKA
 (in Serbian)
Very nice.

MARINA
 English please.

Ana rolls her eyes.

ANA
 Sonja, why don't you tell your
 cousin about your company?

SONJA
 Oh. It's nothing really.

My Instagram just passed 8,000
 followers and so a couple of brands
 are now paying me to promote for
 them. You should follow us.
 '@beautyBySonya' all one word.

ANA
 You should have a look Marina -
 Sonja does amazing tutorials for
 make-up and hair. You could learn
 something.

Marina's gaze is buried in her plate. Irritated.

STANKA
 And how's Alex? He couldn't make
 it?

Sonja starts to answer, but Ana jumps in.

ANA
 Much too busy. Always working and
 working.

SONJA
 He just got a promotion.

STANKA

Has he had a chance to look into
Goran's case?

Stanka is tentative, nervous even asking.

At the end of the table, Goran silently and slowly loads his
fork with ground meat... in his own world.

SONJA

Ahhh, no I don't think so. He's
just so busy.

A pause in conversation. A lingering awkwardness inspired by
the last comment.

STANKA

So, Marina is almost finished with
her PhD now. Her defense is in -
what is it Marina, a month?

MARINA

(not looking up)
4 weeks.

STANKA

5 weeks and she will be Dr.
Stojkovic.

Stanka's attempt to build this up falls flat for the rest of
the table.

ANA

Oh... Wow.

Ana's forced enthusiasm is easy to see through. She changes
the subject immediately to something she can attack.

ANA (CONT'D)

Marina are you dating?

MARINA

No.

ANA

(patronizing)
Hmmm. That's okay.

Marina stops eating. Rage boiling.

MARINA

I'm not looking actually. Don't
have the energy.

ANA

A-ha. That's good. That's good. But you know, there's no time to waste ah? You know, when I was your age I had 2 children already.

Marina grits her teeth.

MARINA

That's great.

ANA

Ah-ha and of course, some people are waiting and waiting these days, but then like 'that'-

She waves dismissively.

ANA (CONT'D)

You're too old and who will take you then.

Marina glares. Then looks to Stanka for back up. None comes.

ANA (CONT'D)

But you're so busy. I'm sure you have much more important things than family.

Ana laughs at her own joke. The others halfheartedly join in.

Marina suddenly stands up.

MARINA

I need to get back to work.

Walks away.

Stanka is embarrassed. Goran oblivious. Ana smug.

INT. MARINA'S ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Marina breaths hard, anger boiling over. She takes a hit of her puffer. And turns to her computer.

In a flash she's logged in, facing her Mom's online banking page once again. She takes a deep breath to steady herself. And click "APPLY".

...

...

WANT TO KEEP READING?

SHOOT ME AN EMAIL:

PETERSRECKOVIC@GMAIL.COM