

A Night with the Ugly Man

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2017

Beefcake Publishing

Part One

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The first thing you need to know about me: *I love to work up drama.*

It is dawn and it is too warm for a February morning. Uncomfortably warm with a dry taste to it. This already makes it clear that today won't be a day like any other day, nor will it be *one of those days* because that wouldn't be the point.

It is troubling how long this dawn takes to end but the tangerine shine is beautiful nonetheless. The low sun grants large shadows to simple things and draws up raw stories that would otherwise remain unseen. *A fetching sight.*

Anyway, it is at this time of the day, in a city that seems ablaze by morning fire; filled with tall, glass buildings and motionless cars, that in a park that would normally, this time of the year, be covered in white delight... There is a man feeding the ducks.

Most people are already at work or getting there, enslaved by traffic. But not this young man here, sitting on a bench at the local city park, throwing crumbs of day-old loaf into the pond. The mother duck and her ducklings appreciate this kind gesture and mesmerize the man with their pirouettes. No ice covers this glass surface and no snow angels are created by kids playing on the grassy slopes. Thanks to the pleasant air, things are green and quiet around the man.

Beside him on the old bench, which is slowly losing its layers of paint, rests an expensive briefcase, containing nothing but an open lunch box. He must have foreseen this visit and the hungry birds.

When the retro tin box is emptied, he diverts his eyes – deep brown, with bright red branching off – away from the ducklings to peer upward at the sky. An inaudible plane leaves two white trails: the creation of new threads of cloud. Hundreds of birds sail off to better resorts, all rustled up like a swarm of bees; moving as one. A lovely pair of butterflies are amazed by their reflections in the looking glass stream and they are unaware of the hungry fish.

But it's still far from summer...

Amongst this all, the man is rubbing the stubble on his chin. His grin hides a nervous touch. The early hour sinks in as his jaws widen in a yawn, making him deaf for a second to the dynamic world around him.

A couple of elderly joggers run by at their own rhythm wearing loud, orange outfits. They are a bright contrast to the man's immaculate suit, the black leather shoes, and his impressive watch. *Dignified.* Out of his vest, he grabs an aluminium flask and takes several sips while keeping the stern grimace on his face. Just the freshness of water, no doubt, needed to regain a clear head and wash away words of argument he must have had some while back. *A family feud, perhaps?*

Beside some shrubberies and sculptured hedges, he notices a man halting his steps. This man is whistling a cheerful tune. It appears to be an officer of the law, swinging his baton around like a cartoon figure would. His cap rests high on his head. It is hard to grant him esteem.

The cop's *cheerio* smile fades under his robust moustache as he looks at the young man. He clears his throat with the rasping sound of a malfunctioning engine and nods his head to the boy. The young man immediately considers his early drink as the misinterpreted cause for this tantrum, but then soon realises the matter: he's sitting

on a memorial bench. A wooden bench which is taken highly into account by the city. He quickly gets to his feet, closes and grabs his briefcase and throws the man yonder an apologizing smile. The cop smirks, shoots a wink and moves on.

Ah yes! Now he remembers, as he stares at his previous seat. *Fascinated in an awful way.* He was wrong: it wasn't the paint that was decaying; it was the woodwork that suffered too much under the uncountable – let alone unreadable – phrases of sympathy carved into it. A memorial bench to remember a tragedy.

Some foreigner who had suffered some unfortunate events – *a goddamn bum* – got caught in a fever of rage when a college student denied him small change. He produced a broken whisky bottle, with liquid still oozing slowly on the inside, and charged the light-headed boy in the back. It didn't take the authorities long to discover the body, hidden behind this very bench. They found the killer easily enough. He didn't even deny his act – there was still blood on his sleeves, for Christ's sake. The first night locked up, he hung himself on a lead pipe using his belt. Their funerals were a day apart. One received mourning gifts, the other remained unnoticed. They'll be kept in mind, both of them.

And so the young businessman carries on his stroll through the park. He walks past overgrown garbage containers infested with wasps and ants which send off a foul stench with the wind. He marches toward an open area featuring a massive fountain. It portrays an archangel perched underneath a marble arch, with his sword heaved against the demons below. These ugly gargoyles spray water into the dry winter wind. Water is their last defence against the tool of God.

He sets his briefcase on the stone basin as he feels the cool drops attack the sweat on his forehead. Absentmindedly, he wipes it clean with a handkerchief with his initials embroidered on it. *An anxious fellow, this one.*

No, not anxious: impatient.

This ambitious, young businessman suddenly isn't feeling all too fine in those slick shoes of his. Maybe that stick up his backside finally reached its depth and is now on the edge of snapping. Or maybe it's his heart, ready to give in at such a young age. Considering his job – his way of life – it wouldn't be such a startling event.

Or maybe it's the change of weather, the man must be thinking, as a sudden gust of cool wind rustles up the small hairs on the back of his neck. He stares beyond the stone fountain and watches heavy clouds make their silent approach. Their deep grey and yellow seem endlessly multiplied in the hallway of glass ant farms in the city. Their breathing will produce thunder, and their murmuring rain. They're the introduction to uncertainties, though what remains certain is a hint of danger. Surely, we'll mark four horsemen following their lead.

This seems to darken the man's mood and with an annoyed shrug he starts to close his vest, for he's sure to hear the descent of silver raindrops. But his hands remain dry and his leather shoes shiny. Come to think of it: it's only the sound that resembles rain. But this tapping is *different*.

No, this sound is too fast. Too eager. And starting to get too loud to be mere souvenirs from above. As he turns around he suddenly remembers what it reminds him of. *The moment he's been waiting for*.

It reminds him of the fast footsteps of a nearing woman in love.

In the brewing noises of an ungrateful city, two lovers find comfort in a warm embrace. They share it alone, for it is a private matter. But the wedding band on the finger of the man and the absence of one on the lady's raises the question if they truly are the only ones involved. Also, the *Snoopy* print on his tie clearly indicates offspring, which foretells difficulties.

While she was closing in, just before, her quick paces made petals of harassed flowers float upward to dwell around her elegant feet.

Unlike the young man, she chose to dress like a pleasant summer's day: seemingly hot at first, minding only the amount of skin visible, but soon after more subtle and just plain sublime. No *tomboy* outfit for her, no sir.

White threads form her dress and lavender-blue slippers grace her light frame. The dark skies, now almost above them, are of little concern. Even if it starts to rain, she'll remain the bright light through the grey clouds of his life.

The man is able to feel the lady's smile, though his own face is sideways on her head, smelling the auburn hair. The tenderness of his chest pleases her; the beating plays a love tune, no doubt. Slowly, she leans backward, with her arms still around him but now lowered to his waist. The man copies her movement. They look at each other in their own unique way, without being aware that their shared pose seems heart-shaped. Corny as it may seem, it is rather sweet.

They continue speaking of sweet nothings. Whispers – only for them to know. Putting themselves beyond rumours and ill-meant words, for they know what's real and what's not. But in this world – *our world* – far from their gloriously simple world, dialogues fade out eventually. Sometimes, all that needs to be said is told – allowing the opportunity to experience the true affection of shutting the hell up. At this the man is surely apt, for he is more of a silent type. No man for small talk – he would probably even frown upon dirty limericks and such. The woman, on the other hand, is more of a raconteur, eager to lose herself in her own spinning of stories and recollections of gossip. Under the amused and favourable smile of the man, she titters away the time and the last rays of golden light.

A pleasant bar nearby, spreading the delightful bitter smell of freshly poured coffee, has tickled their senses. The time spent in the park is about to end, the setting has turned dull to the young businessman – meaningless, for she's here now.

It takes her a while to notice his subtle inquiry to move onward. She nods approvingly; her mouth must be longing for a refreshment.

Delicately the man regains control over his hand to fetch the briefcase resting against the side of the fountain, while the other one still lovingly holds the soft hand of the young lady by his side. *His young lady.*

As he reaches for the briefcase, he immediately feels a stinging pain on the other side of his body – his other hand.

Lovers tend to squeeze hands. But not like this.

The force put behind those feminine fingernails isn't of a teasing quality. With a hollow expression, he quickly moves his eyes past her grasp – on his palm, blood creeps, making it seem like her red-dyed fingernails melt into his hand – to look at her.

The healthy colour has been swept away from her cheeks and her stare is empty. Her mouth still moves slowly, as if to finish her last story. Her hand is pressed to her chest, as if something utterly beautiful crossed her eyes and she has trouble believing it. *But that's not it.* The man catches her as she stumbles backward with the grace of a dying swan.

The impatient cars stacked up in front of a traffic light nearby and the spewing water of the fountain make his screams for help futile. In cracks of the pavement, beside cigarette buds and spilled litter, clear red streams start to flow. Clouds above rumble, but the man doesn't care. Neither does he care how or what – though the matter of *why* seems obvious. No. He only cares for her.

It starts to rain. The clear drops make the coloured ones stand out on the dress of the woman. He ceases his unheard cries, for no help nears. No cavalry rides from the sunset. He looks down at her, desperately touching her cheeks and caressing her hair to make sure she's still there. Lying to himself that everything's alright. He weeps slow tears as he holds his hand steady under her fragile neck, feeling her passionate pulse ease with every word he says. He speaks quickly and without hesitation, making it seem like he's praying. But he isn't. It's just that... he only has little time left. *He's saying goodbye.*

While smiling a fading smile, she guides the wet face of the man closer to her lips, silencing him instantly. Her fingers trace his cheek with red lines. Her ghost of a grin makes clear that her thoughts are nowhere near this very point. The trees and roads around them are covered in grey lines, moaning under the insistent wind and derived of any appeal they ever had. And they mean nothing to the young lady. Only the drenched man, kneeling over her and sobbing quietly, matters. Existing both in our world as in the one beckoning her forward. With sparkles in her eyes, she soothes him and with little effort she presses his lips to hers. In the pouring rain, holding each other close, it comes to an end.

It was all worth it..

And me...?

I'm standing right here. At a distance, but not *that* far away. To them, to anyone, I don't matter. I don't know them; never had the chance to meet them. But still I'm looking at them. Right now. Seeing this...

For a moment – *a second, no longer* – I panic. I want to help but I'm nowhere near the attractive scenery where the man mourns his lost love. I'm in a hotel room. The low and curvy ceiling makes clear that this is the top floor. The attic. High enough to regard things clearly and do things accurately but it also renders a man helpless.

The rear window is open. Feathers of cooing pigeons on the balcony flutter inward past dusty furniture and naked showroom models covered in a plastic coat. I lean against the wall beside the untied curtains and feel the soaked wind whipping up my hair and pressing my unbuttoned shirt to my sweaty skin. The low sun and a busted heater turned this room into a sauna, suffocating wooden smell included. *So don't mind me feeling refreshed.*

On the streets orange flares start to glow like courageous fireflies, making the night fall early this morning. The gloomy light accentuates the tired, worried look on my face as I stare down at

him. My breathing is deep, but not hastened. The few people that do dare to confront the ways of the weather have little eye for the two *star-crossed* lovers, as they hurry towards drier grounds. And why should they? *Them kids must be cuddling or something, just like youngsters ought to do...*

Within reach, on a table next to a rusted chandelier, rests a rifle. Guilty smoke crawls out of its metal tube. I grab the rifle, bring it up to my shoulders and shift my focus to the man. *A second, no longer...* I reload.

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It's night and it's raining. It always seems to rain these days. Not an upright downpour but more like an extremely frustrating dribble. It never seems quite dramatic enough to reach for an umbrella or to raise a hood over one's head. But in the end you'd be drenched. In the end you would *just have enough* and be downright upset. There are heavy clouds brooding not so high up and eager silver whips and sick coughs walk with them.

This early, bright morning was a clear exception to cherish. Afterward, darkness and bleak vibrations swept over the streets. It was an abrupt change that affected the whole city. The rather warm winter air isn't capable of making a difference. It doesn't really seem to care, does not seem to respect the ways of the seasons. Tonight, this unwelcoming city – whose name I forgot – will bathe in its own filth.

Hiding under my dark coat, I make my way through the crowd – apparently not minding the weather. The fact they're used to this weather chills me more than my soaked boot heels and running nose. As I take bigger steps and try to hurry on, my coat kisses the curb. The edge will be crumbling with dirt by the end of the night.

This particular neighborhood seems to be a busy area of the city, attracting all sorts and their consorts. Lining the streets are flower salesmen: a bunch of immigrants, or at least non-locals, speaking in tongues as if something was jammed down their throats. They let their hands swoop aggressively through the air while negotiating prices with tourists. Passionate people, if not tiresome. Later on, they'll harass couples in bars and restaurants for a sale.

Connecting the two opposite rows of high rooftops are banners, all featuring angels, lying astride bright clouds. On them, I read the

whereabouts of parties organized for the young – *parties not to be held in this vicinity, thank god.*

Earlier, I walked down the main road and noticed flaring lights at the city line, as if the woodlands were put ablaze. A continuous thumping noise made windows vibrate and gasoline puddles stir. The music works on my nerves still. Apparently there is way too much going on today.

I stroll past small, trivial shops. Ideal for the visitors and the bored bourgeoisie because the products in these showcases are useless. Crystal ducks, coffee pots shaped like Cocker Spaniels, and chocolate fountains – I kid you not. Another window reveals a pastry shop with fine delicacies: small pastries that look like small pieces of shit to be found on a spaceship. In other unappealing showcases, vague pink and baby-blue auras radiate from TL-bulbs, bringing back the eighties and whores. Awful Miami-like bordellos or those lined up beside the local train station never gave me any comfort. In this part of town there are no dames behind milky glass, only fluffy puppies and surreal, big hearts equipped with hands and feet and creepy smiles.

Every now and then, heart-shaped balloons fill the void between bars and shops. It is hard to stay oblivious to the signs everywhere. Let the corny and fanatical unite, for the feast of Valentine is near.

But ignore the holiday cheer and this city is not unlike any other. The inhabitants all strive to stand out and in that they remain equal. Crossing my view are several youngsters dressed in classy, though sinister, Victorian clothes. Their laconic faces covered in grey make-up, including their unripe lips. Their canes spread a dull echo as it precedes their queer walks. Far descendants from the punk culture, though not as vigilant and rough. Not by far. Bunch of skinny puffs and self-cutters, all on their way toward their own story of Poe. As if I appear that different, the girls shoot me questioning glares. Their eyebrows are shaved off and replaced by crookedly-drawn lines.

Moving past these hoodlums I notice another gang of kids, seated on the thick stairs of the local library. Dressed in loud-colored wardrobe, they appear to be entranced in a dance. Their dancing is psychedelic, to say the least, presumably mimicking a spastic malfunction of the limbs. Sweet, lavender-like smoke creeps from improvised ashtrays. They too find my presence unsettling.

Hastening my steps, I ponder about these youths. I just... don't get any of it. Times and ways have always moved on. But they haven't necessarily improved.

I change my route and turn into a dark, more peaceful alley. Here, only the rustle of drops and scurrying rats interfere my brooding thoughts. This sideway, featuring gorgeous, petite rows of houses, is untouched by the vulgar eyes of tourists... Any architect's troubled, wet dream.

The slender backs of houses meet in full discretion here, where laundry is left to dry on better days. A closed-up, barred-shut remnant of an Italian restaurant catches my eye. The long-lost glory of nineties bachelor parties comes to mind, for a handful of party hats with Pink Floyd-esque depictions lie scattered on the counter.

This morning was... I come to a halt underneath a dated lamppost, whose glow shifts as the power flows. An apotheosis out of any 50's detective pulp story. Eyes closed, I focus on my breathing. Listening to the wheezy sound of my crammed nostrils. My breath sounds like that of a man who hasn't moved properly in years and reeks of a toilet drain in Yankee stadium during half-time. If I was ever in shape, I'm out of it now.

This morning wasn't exactly how I imagined it to be. The weather worked unfortunately distracting and the sweat tempered my view. But the shots were still good. *Of course they were good!* So that's that, I suppose. There really isn't anything else further to consider. And I won't. Gladly.

It seems like several weeks ago, for my sense of time is lost with my sense of purpose, but I know I arrived this very morning at the local train station. Though not early enough to avoid the morning rush. This city is massive in its antique way. I could have travelled by car or even by plane, but I've always preferred travelling by train. The rhythmic vibrations work pleasingly on my mood and lull me to sleep if previous nights failed to do so. Every thump touches my insides. The slow, metallic beating wings of an iron falcon.

Never, not even once, will anyone sit beside me. I always notice a hesitation on their part as they look for a seat, which mostly results in some fast scurry onward or a sudden urge to stay up. It's not that I'm an unappealing guy, but I do stand out. Maybe they sense it – like a prehistoric, subconscious survival skill, warning the cavemen from gunfire and napalm.

There was a fellow in the back of the wagon speaking into his phone with an incredibly annoying voice. He spoke for about three quarters of the trip – I was keeping count. The problem was that he couldn't help it. His voice wasn't even that loud and you could tell he didn't do it on purpose. Even the topics weren't dull: exchange policies in Siberian prisons and Guatemalan cooking. He was just very irritating and all of the train passengers shot each other glances as if agreeing they had to get rid of him. An unspoken agreement which could have made all of them accomplices to a vile crime of murder... He got off eventually at some morose town somewhere, before anything interesting could happen. *Good for you.*

Alas, there was no smoke in the station from an exhausted train engine, which would have been a very classy detail to add. After leaving the carriage at the terminal, I first stretched my back, for it was a long ride and my age is no longer granting me things. I went along with the crowd as we moved as one retarded legion of pigeons toward a crisp clean window. There were a whole bunch of suits and dull skirts with no children around. We marched through a gorgeous main hall with broad marble steps from an era when people walked

a lighter pace. People were chatting everywhere, but no one seemed to be saying anything. On the side, there were small bakeries – selling pastries and rolls. But even with the burning ovens nearby it was the old smell of stone – a very cold hint – that strayed. As we continued onward, the click-clacking of the quick paces of our hard soles didn't quite mask the hot music. At the bottom of the tall stairs there were people gathered, hindering the rushed travelers. And these people were dancing.

An apparent marathon of some southern, temperamental dance was reaching its end within the central station. Three couples were – if I could believe the timer – at it for almost 24 hours straight and they had reached the point where their dancing was more like exhausted leaning. One man, sweaty as a tempest, was trying to mask the snoring of his salsa partner with loud chanting *olé's*, but he was only fooling himself. As my flock of seagulls and I moved away towards the exit, I heard a short shriek, a loud applause, and the announcement of the final round. The last dance commenced.

Leaning against cold bricks of someone's home, I am humming a tune I don't know – must have picked it up somewhere in a record store. A couple, dressed for a gala, shoot me a questioning, amused look. I choose to exit the alley with a hastened gait and carelessly wander into a square that hurts my eyes. There is too much going on. The people and their colors are too loud.

The main square.

It's far too crowded. Also, it is an ugly square. The establishments have lost their charm as they sold their souls to clad their ancient bricks with beer ads and illiterate, tempered shop signs. I read CHIP BEER and NUD GURLZ – *not girls?* Their attempt to wink me closer fails.

In the center of the square, dozens of small tables at shoulder length are spread across the arena – clustered to form a heart outline. Parasols with periodically blinking lights are vigilant above

these stands to shield the fat, rich cats from the rain. Shiny buckets show iced bottles of fine champagne and other bubbly alcohols. Chubby, old men have little trouble to raise their heads as they do with their filled-to-the-rim glasses and muster an appetizing laugh above their three chins. They conclude with a combined bellowing sound of approval. "Yeeeeeeeeeeees!" they all agree. *If only I had enough ammunition.*

And far higher, in a poor attempt to hide from the clouds, is a clock and its massive tower. A point of orientation for the boats coming in, because this city used to be a major harbor. Now this church and its tower are used to lure in the tourists. On the grand structure, someone's projecting love-scenes in black and white - scenes from dated movies. Not necessarily old movies, just forgotten movies. And the audio is love jingles. On the square, numerous couples are dancing while holding each other close and only pausing their kissing to chant an obvious lyric every now and then. This all could have easily been on any Hallmark card. That is if you'd mind the shitload of booze around. And the roses. Flashy red outfits. And those balloons. Damn those balloons.

And as if the devil's behind it, some small kid lets slip the ribbon attached to a balloon and watches it go up. His feeble cries are nothing in the mass and he presses his hysterical face into the jeans leg of his father, almost as distraught as... well: as a kid who just lost his balloon.

Everyone around - and I wish I was exaggerating, but I'm not - is following this colorful, floating bandit up into the sky. All under a spell. *A cheap parlor trick.* No smooth words being uttered or kisses spent. Some crane their heads to an almost unnatural degree. And I am one of the crowd, face upward and cheeks running cold and starting to hurt by tough drops. And no one is blinking. The many spots on the square give off a maroon hue and in this nightly rain these people seem showered in blood.

A blast in the distance – exploding jet engine is what I'd reckon – sets everything back into motion as the world moves on. As if nothing happened – *this is true!* I use the back of my sleeve to wipe my face as dry as possible and then I hurry along, only paying attention to one last particular couple. An exceptional sight: a boy whose heart was suddenly too big. A boy who had already claimed himself a girl as if she had nothing to say about it. Dramatically he threw away the umbrella and used both hands to swing her back. A perfect movie kiss in the rain. Marvelous.