

An Ugly Man

Previously unpublished

Gustav Sharp sat on the floor of the padded, white, and brightly lit cell. He massaged his temples. Four white speakers were placed at each corner, padlocked inside white iron cages. The speakers blasted noise at timed intervals: a mixture of shrill buzz saws and baritone growls in an auditory attack, like repeated punches to the head.

At the moment, though, it was quiet, and in the quiet Gustav concluded, much to his dismay, that he had no idea what was happening, or why it was happening.

A few hours ago he'd been asleep in his bed. Armed men in black outfits had woken him; they'd put a bag over his head, and after what seemed like a long ride, the purring of the car engine the only sound Gustav managed to distinguish, here he was, locked up and subjected to noise--and at a complete loss as to why.

Enough!

He got up from the floor and walked to the white door, and just as he raised his arm, the noise burst upon him. He covered his ears and looked around the cell. For a moment he was sure he'd faint. The whiteness of the cell and the noise converged and gathered violent mass.

Gustav started pacing: "Stop it! Stop it!"

The noise cut off and was replaced by a woman's calm, slick voice--like an oil spill. "Mr. Sharp," she said, "we cannot let you arrive at REM. The music is a necessary precaution."

Gustav tried to make sense of the words; they flitted about inside him like specks of dust. He put his hands to his head. "Whatever you think I've done, I haven't," he said and flung his arms out. "Let me out."

The woman's voice--now altered, softer--flowed through the speakers. "I'm sorry," she said, "but you represent a very real threat, Mr. Sharp."

There was, Gustav decided, a lingering sadness to the timbre of the woman's voice--he imagined the wind rattling a birch tree--and it was so at odds with the naked violence of the cell that he couldn't help but shrug his shoulders. "I've done nothing," he said.

"May I call you Gustav?"

He shook his head, said, "Who are you people?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not at liberty to disclose--"

"You're not at liberty?" he said. "Well, then, *where am I?*"

"I'm really not at liberty to say, Gustav. I'm sorry, but your current inconvenience keeps people safe and alive."

"Oh, please," he said. "I'm in a padded cell!" His voice broke, and a wave of tiredness washed over him. He sat down.

"Aren't you on some level aware of your dreams, Gustav? The monsters?"

No, he thought with the finality of one syllable. "Stop calling me Gustav. You don't get to call me Gustav." He lay down flat--hoping the hardness of the floor against his back would somehow tether him to reality. He put his arm over his eyes and pressed down hard. In the darkness that ensued, a stick figure in blue chalk appeared, line by line. Gustav slowly hung the stick figure.

He shot up. His heart pounded against his ribs; once again, he placed his back on the floor, stared at the sleek white surface of the ceiling, the oval lights dimly emanating. *What kind of madness is this?*

The noise erupted.

"No, no, no." He stood up and started rocking to the rhythm of his pleading.
"No!"

The noise cut off.

“I’m really very sorry, Gustav,” the woman said, “but you cannot be allowed to reach REM.”

“Can’t you see I’m not sleeping!?”

“Gustav, please--are you or aren’t you aware of your dreams, the monsters?”

“I’m aware of all kinds of monsters!” He waved his arms. “Why am I here?”

“Gustav, will you please listen--”

“You don’t get to call me Gustav!”

There was a brief pause. “Behind you,” the woman said.

Gustav turned around. A hatch on the left side of the white door slid open, uncovering a flat screen. The screen showed a visual in low resolution; there was no sound.

Gustav approached the screen, tentatively, as if it may burst at any moment. He leaned in, carefully, and looked closer. The screen showed an empty sidewalk, filmed from a vantage point high up. The sun, it seemed, was about to set. Lining the sidewalk were three stores: a toy store, a pawn shop, and a music store. Behind the toy store’s glass window were four big, brown teddy bears placed in a row, sitting with their sewed on smiles. The music store and the pawn shop looked familiar, thought Gustav. Without breaking his focus on the screen, he asked, “Where’s this?”

“You don’t recognize it?”

“I’ve never seen a toy store on Bleecher.” He turned away from the screen, “There’s no toy store on Bleecher.”

The woman didn’t respond.

“So these are the monsters then, are they?” he asked. “The bears?”

The woman still didn’t respond; Gustav continued looking at the screen, feeling ill at ease--and then the teddy bear furthest to the right in the row moved. It stood up, turned to its left--its fingerless arms stretched out--and ripped the head of its neighboring teddy bear clean off. It chucked the head at the store window. The head bounced back and spilled some of its filling. The animated teddy bear waddled to the

store window and banged its head repeatedly against the glass. A fine web spread on the glass till, at last, it shattered. The teddy bear hopped onto the sidewalk, and there it stood, rotating its head three hundred and sixty degrees, over and over again, like a firehouse-lantern.

Gustav stepped back from the screen. "What is this?" His outstretched arms elongated the question.

"This, Gustav, is but one monster of your dreams."

"You keep saying that--"

"To appreciate the gravity of the situation, I advise you to look at the screen."

Gustav first stared at his outstretched arms, then at the screen.

On the screen the teddy bear's head was still rotating; it stopped, seemingly focused on something to the left, outside the camera's visual range. The teddy bear kept its head locked to the left. A few seconds drifted by, and Gustav experienced these seconds as the tautening of his inner strings. A long blue line appeared--no: two, three, four long blue lines appeared. They were all attached to a vertical blue line, acting as torso, and on top of the vertical blue line rested a transparent globe. Sure enough, thought Gustav with a shudder--it was a large, blue stick figure in 3 D. There was some sort of liquid inside the transparent globe, and in the liquid--Gustav retched--were a number of small eyes with fins attached at the sides. The stick figure's arms, placed at equidistance from head to ground, picked up the teddy bear and put it on its globe head. The teddy bear waved its arms up and down, as if in rapture, and the stick figure bounced up and down while holding the teddy bear steady with its stick arms. The small, finned eyes bobbed about in the liquid.

"Enough. Turn it off!"

"This was three days ago, Gustav. Do you recall having such a dream?"

Are they recording my dreams? He shook his head. "Turn it off," he commanded, but there was no command in his voice; he continued staring at the screen.

While the stick figure and the teddy bear made jolly, an older woman appeared from the right. She stopped. She seemed to be saying something, her arms in wild movement. No, Gustav decided--she was screaming.

She must be screaming.

The stick figure put the teddy bear on the sidewalk. The teddy bear waddled toward the woman; the stick figure removed its globe head and chucked it at the woman--it hit her face and knocked her to the asphalt.

Gustav imagined the sound of facial bones breaking and teeth shattering. He put his hands to his cheeks.

The teddy bear, now by the woman's fallen body, kicked her caved in head with its footless leg. Then a blinding light from high up struck the teddy bear, transformed it into a black mist; the black mist floated back toward the stick figure, enveloped it--disintegrated it.

Gustav patted his cheeks, not knowing why.

The black mist started spinning, ever faster, turning itself into a flurry. From inside the flurry, a figure stepped out: two legs, two arms, one head; it was entirely white, entirely without features, and instead of fingers it had long claws.

"Turn it off!"

"I'm sorry, Gustav. And this is from two days ago. Do you recall having this dream?" The screen flickered and the scenery changed, but Gustav didn't look. He'd turned his back to the screen.

"Please," he urged. Whatever happened on the screen, he didn't want to know. They, or she--his tormentor--could attack him with all the noise and all the advisable nudges in the world; he wouldn't watch.

"Your dreams, Gustav, are responsible for the deaths of three, so far--"

"Don't call me Gustav!"

"One of your monsters killed a forty-five-year-old man yesterday, a husband and a father of three."

“No, there’s no such thing.”

“You are what we call a pro--”

“There’s no such thing!”

“You are what we call a pro-cog--a conflation of projection and cognition, or more accurately, you are a projector of dream state cognition.”

Gustav shook his head.

“We really cannot allow you to sleep, Gustav,” the woman said.

Gustav stopped shaking his head, and on his face was a bungled representation of a smile. “And then what? You’re going to keep me awake for the rest of my life?”

“We all do dream, Gustav. We just cannot let you.”

“Because I’m a pro-cog, right,” Gustav said, but he didn’t grant himself ownership of his own words, especially not that word, “and because that means that my dreams kill people, right?” He sat down, and he closed his eyes. He thought about words, and he thought that words are oddities, semantic animals practicing their inherent violence with abandon. *Pro-cog?* We are cats chasing the reflection of the sun, he thought, and he didn’t take well to the image; his throat closed up. “Can I get something to drink?” he asked.

The question lingered in the air. The woman didn’t respond. She seemed to be weighing the question in her palm as if to ascertain its value. “Hold on a second,” she said.

Gustav opened his eyes. Once again, there was the whiteness, the sleek surface of no color or all color that was intent on grinding his mind to dust. *We are cats chasing the reflection of the sun?*

“Is this what happens when you don’t sleep?” he mumbled. “Is this what happens!”

A hatch next to the small television screen--now black--slid open. A tray was placed on the outside ledge. A glass of water was on the tray, and next to the glass was a neatly folded handkerchief.

Gustav got to his feet and dashed to the hatch; he bent down and looked up. There she was, the woman. It must be, he thought, although she didn't look anything like he'd imagined. *She ought to have been a blonde, not a brunette; she ought to have had long, blonde hair in a bun, not brown, short hair and bangs. And those bangs, parted in the middle, didn't seem right.* He trained his eyes on her, asked, "Is it you?"

She nodded, a quick flick of the head, and then she put her head to the side, studied him before leaning toward the hatch.

Gustav inched toward her, expecting her to say something, needing her to say something. She didn't; instead, she extended her arm, put her hand on his cheek. Her palm was cold, and it sent a shiver through Gustav's body. He started crying, lightly, and he imagined himself situated within the scene of a childhood memory, the light tap of the summer rain on the corrugated roof of his father's barn, and how the hay smelled. "Is it true?" he asked.

The woman removed her hand, tapped twice with her index finger on the handkerchief, and then she left. Gustav watched her disappear. And so it goes, he thought, wiped the tears away and picked up the tray. The hatch closed. He put the tray on the floor and sat down. He drank the water; he put his finger on the handkerchief. He pulled it open. Inside was a small, polished knife. It glinted. On the handkerchief was written: Do it quick before they notice. The handwriting was neat, controlled.

Gustav picked up the knife. He opened up a small slit on the tip of his finger and watched a single bead of blood sprout up. He held the knife in front of his face and looked at the reflection, a sliver of his gaunt face.

Such an ugly man, he thought. I'm such an ugly man.

And the noise erupted.