

Butts, Meet Roger

By Elijah Thomas

Grimy. Grimy is how I would describe the sewers. The literal meaning of the word fits, and the word *feels* like the sewers. Grime lives in the sewers. It's really everything that you come to expect from watching movies and television. I feel like I'm watching an episode of *ninja turtles*: Green goop on the walls that you don't really want to think of how it got there, putrid odors emanating from murky water, mysterious echoes bouncing through narrow tunnels. The only thing missing is skateboarding mutants. I find hope in the little brown poops sailing down the waterway like little brown battleships. My admiration for this small fleet, pressing onward into the depths, wells in my mind as I walk. I stop for a moment. "Ahoy," I pronounce with a salute. They continue to bob, no nod, in the water as if to say "At ease, soldier." I continue to walk.

I'm not really sure why I was sent down here. I know the who's, the what-for's, the where's, the when's, but I am at a loss for the why. This surprises me. I'm typically pretty on top of these kinds of jobs. Normally it's retrieve a cat from a tree, or perhaps track down a dog that has run away and been missing for a couple of days. Always in cities, in parks, in suburbs... never sewers. And a dog? They had convinced me that little Daria had a fascination with storm drains and water piping ever since she was a pup. It's pretty cute. Nothing too outrageous.

"We never even understood why she disappeared!" Exclaimed the client. A proper well-to-do couple living in some Summerset Village or Bunksley's Hideaway or another proper yuppie community. "She's just so clean and precious. What would ever motivate her away from us? Her family? She probably ran out front one afternoon. We often let her do that. She always stays around the yard and keeps to herself. This is a nice neighborhood. We've never had any issues. I would bet it was some nasty brute dog wandering around looking for a little darling to take advantage of, and she was pressed for options so she may have just hopped right on into the storm drain across the street since the front door was closed. Like a clever little devil! Well I'm proud of her!"

Yes, a clever little devil. She's eluded me for two days now. I've scoured the neighborhoods, the local dog hang-outs, the surrounding rural area, and I've yet to see fur or even hear a peep. I've a number of well-informed contacts in this line of work, but none of them could yield any information relating to "Daria." Had the clients not warned me of her proclivity to sewers, I would have assumed she were dead by now and used the next three days to pretend I'm looking and in reality take the days off. I do it for all of my clients' losses. It's not that I'm lazy, it's just that there's no

use. I have great faith in my contacts, and it rarely takes me more than a day and a half to crack a case. I am down to last resorts with this one, and, to be frank, I'm tired of walking through poop and trash and grime, but I remain compelled to find Daria. My intuition tells me she is down here.

A shadow flickers in a nearby tunnel directly to my right. There is no more movement. I am in a junction. The bell-shaped passage I'd been travelling leads out further into an opening, and to my right is a narrow passage devoid of light. Was it Daria? I wouldn't have even paid notice to this path had that tiny reflection of whatever-it-was not caught my eye.

"Daria?" I call. There is no response. "Daria, dear, I'm here to help you back home. I'm with ----- and ----- . They miss you dearly."

I stand leaning over with my ear outstretched.

"Is someone barking out there?" A distant grumble-voice echoes after a moment. He sighs. "It's probably not real. Am I losing it already?"

A man's voice. Not quite what I had expected, but maybe he could help.

"I'm sorry, friend." I offer as I peek around the corner to get a better look. "That barking was me. I thought it might help me find something I've been looking for. Have you seen a dog around here? Small, happy long-hair chihuahua?"

He certainly looks worse for wear. Even in the dank darkness his clothes look faded and scrapped. One might suspect that he had been born in those clothes. A tiny baby born in a bright, fresh green and white plaid shirt tucked into a pair of creased khakis fading every day to the point where a man throws himself out with his clothes because they have become so threadbare and tragic. That would be a movie I would watch. I think everyone would like that baby. No baby deserves a tragedy so grand. The theater would cry as the baby-man sat in the garbage with his clothes.

And now I stare into this grand baby's dull blue eyes as he searches for words to speak. Or perhaps he is not searching. Perhaps there is no response to being asked about a missing dog when one has been lounging in the sewers for who knows how long. The thatched gray beard housing his chapped lips does not twitch or give any sign to spoken word.

"Is that a no, then?" I ask with a shrug of the shoulders. "I suppose I will be headed..."

"No, I've not seen a dog." He declares resolutely. "In fact, I've not seen or heard any life outside of a few rats." He let his head wander as he may have pondered where his rat friends have gone off to. "And I find it quite strange for you to be down here." His head dips back down and his worn hands scratch at the ground. "Would you kindly leave me alone?"

Oh, come now. Here is a mystery. I am a detective. As if I would just leave like a Jehova's

witness knocking at your door. I'm a detective for Christ's sake.

"Yes, of course." I begin to lean down to sit with the fellow. "I was just wondering if you might be able to help me a bit..."

"I have come down here to die."

His head snaps back from wandering and his eyes lock on mine. His hands hang limp on his belly. My body slows and reverses to stand. Grand baby, no. Grand baby, why have you come down here to die?

"Have you now?" I ask. I lean down and return his stare with a squint. I move closer until our noses are nearly touching. I jump back and release my words. My lips cannot help but curl into a small smile and my posture relaxes as my hands begin to speak along with my mouth. "Certainly, you have picked the finest place to abandon this earthly form. Down amidst decay and refuse." I lean back, close my eyes and raise my index finger like a knowing professor. "Quite poignant!"

His head dips down and his gaze sinks to the moist bricked ground upon which he sits. If he was looking for a pity party, I forgot the keg. Perhaps if I had received an invitation earlier, there would be no such problems.

"And why is it that you would want to die, friend?" I ask sternly. My face straightens. "Come, and tell me of your long-thought purpose." Please, grand baby.

He continues to stare with his hollow gaze. "I apologize, but it is not your place to know." His right hand begins to scratch at the ground once more. He looks up at me with a look of slight disgust. "But you seem intent to stay. What I can offer you instead is a story. One of my favorite ghost stories. It should satisfy you and send you on your way."

Light returns to his eyes as the flashlight reflects back from my right hand. His hands plant and arms straighten as he lifts his body and struggles to bring his feet under body. One arm gives out momentarily and he falls back on his butt. He looks to his quitter arm. He bites his chewed lips and replants his hand. His body raises and feet retract back underneath like a spring being compressed. The blackened feet surrounded by gnarled salmon sneakers take hold of the firm footing and allow him to stand nearly upright. Props to you, grand baby--you little calf. You're legs are jelly and yet you raise yourself.

"I suppose it might be proper to introduce myself." His weathered hands move to swipe some of the dust from his torn, dirt-filled button down shirt. He extends his hand. "My name's Roger. Roger Samsa."

I shift my weight and wipe my own sweaty hand on my cargo shorts before grasping his hand

in the beauty of friendship.

If we were dogs, such a ritual would be futile. For one, we would have paws with immobile digits. The notion of grasping something is so far outside of canine knowledge that if one dog were to ever consider the idea and introduce it to dog culture at large, the said dog would be shunned and ridiculed. It might be comforting to know that he might never be stoned to death. Two, who would want to shake a hand when a culture already has an established greeting by means of sniffing butts? There is no anonymous introduction more intimate than becoming familiar with another's window where filth and grime are dumped and forgotten. To look beyond wagging tail and panting mouth—dirty anus and sweaty groin, into the secrecy of one's insides overwhelms me. I feel moved to bend down and sniff my new friend Roger. I feel assured that he would sooner die immediately than have a man smell his ass. Damn you, culture, and your mental persuasions.

If I could know this man, Roger. If I could find his shit, so much more foul, repugnant, invisible... I might be able to connect beyond a simple handshake. A momentary contact of skin that is forgotten as quickly as it is completed. The emptiness of interaction is foul.

Roger clears his throat and looks about nervously. I'm not quite sure how long we've had hands locked. "The name is Butts Mackenzie," I grin. "I'm a local detective specializing in animal-centric crimes and law-breaking occurrences. Now what of this story?"

Our hands release. Roger's eyes drop to his familiar spot on the floor, and quickly look back up to mine. "Alright, settle in."

"In a past time, not too distant from now, there was a ghost. This ghost was not always a ghost—in fact he was a man, as most ghosts start out." He looks down to his right and quickly scratches his elbow. His eyes return to mine. "I assume."

A man! Quite the opening line. Also what is the deal with ghosts? I am hooked.

"This man had no troubles. He breezed through childhood and school, and graduated law school with relative ease and little debt. Before long, he met a woman with whom he fell deeply in love. What's more, she loved him back. They lived together, happy and affluent. The world was theirs, and no one could take it. Wars could come and go, disasters would destroy and be forgotten, but they knew they would be together." He takes hold of himself to cross his arms, and scratches harder at his upper arms as his story continues. "Or perhaps it may be better to say that *he* knew that they would always be together."

"It wasn't long before she decided she had enough. She was not in love with this man. She could not continue a marriage that she knew would be fruitless and difficult. She tried to make the

process as quick and painless as she could, but what is quick and painless in the endeavors of love? The man was dumbfounded--blindsided by something so far removed from his perception of reality. He wanted desperately to reverse what could have only been a passing fancy on her part. Before he could develop the words to restore his marriage, prove his love to her, rekindle what had been there in her heart but faded over time without her realizing, she was gone and would not return."

He takes back to the floor, leaning on the wall with his left hand to drop his rear and let it slide down the narrow enclosure that surrounds us. He reaches the floor, shifts his weight for a moment and falls silent for a moment.

"Well?" I ask. "And what of this ghost?" He continues to look out, without hope, without life. "I am settled in for a ghost story, yes?" I wave my hand in front of his face.

"And from then on his life lost its glimmer," he continues without acknowledgement. His unsympathetic hand scores the ground more fervently than before leaving tiny streaks of blood and fingernail. His lips purse and eyebrows lower. "Civil law was legalese and people bullying one another for personal profit. His earned money held no value and anything that money might buy was a joyless acid that only ate further at his heart to deepen the wound. Money was all he thought he had, and he would continue to spend until that acid ate his heart in its entirety." His eyes look up to mine and relax. His mouth spreads into a tired smile. "And he died."

Yes, yes, a love story. Tragic. Now the terrific climax! Certainly this ghost is about to haunt the badonk out of this woman. This ghost is going to run around, not literally of course, and throw plates and make rooms a bit colder than they should be and whisper terrible frights into the woman's ear.

"And so this ghost roamed. Not really seeking vengeance or resolution, just some source of hope in people. Something to let him know that others can carry on better than he had, and that some semblance of love existed in truth, however minute. Certainly, there must be others that experience true and selfless love. He would spend time wandering at the heart of the downtown area with the homeless. He knew in his vacant heart that if anyone would receive love, it was those that were physically dependent on it for their survival. He would wait with legless fellows, blind ex-businessmen, abused prostitute left-overs on street sides for hours as countless faces passed by intent to ignore these people." His right hand claws into the brick, perhaps seeking escape from such a frightening story. I'm sure even as a child, this right hand would hide tight beneath the covers in escape from a monster. The left hand merely quivers in his lap in a clenched fist.

"Did these passer-bys need all this money? Oh yes," he snarls, "certainly! What would they

do without it? 'A Buick is not a luxury, it is a *necessity!*' They'd say. 'We are not animals. How will my children receive an education? Why don't you get up off your ass and do some *work*. You are a burden to me and the world in which we live.'"

His demeanor relaxes and his hands come together to rest his face upon. "And these destitute, refused people saw themselves as burdens, and became ghosts themselves. The city filled with ghosts. The ghosts outnumbered the people, but the people would never know. What could the ghosts do? They could only watch or find rest. And so after watching long enough, our original ghost decided he had enough. There was no encompassing love. There was no peaceful rest. He would pass on embittered and alone, and so it would go."

"Huh!" I cover my mouth and cough gently into my fist. I clear my throat to emphasize my distaste for the lackluster ending. "Well that was a story."

"Yes, it was." From his hand-pedestaled face he looks up to me. "So now you may leave."

"Au contraire." I bow to my haunches and settle to a cross-legged seat next to my new friend Roger. I set the flashlight down beside me and it illuminates the blank wall in front of us. "Can I not return your story with a story of my own? I don't really see you doing much of anything else for the next while." I look beside me to the darkness that would be his face and smile. "Mine takes the form of a limerick--I hope you don't mind." There is no response. I guess that's my cue. I recite to my attentive audience of wall and Roger.

"There once was a boy from McGee
Whose p'rents knew him down to a 'T.'
But 'T' without shape
Or distinguished type
And resembled more of an 'E.'

And without form of attention,
His tendencies fell toward aggression.
It came to be time,
He found a small bird,
Thought, 'now it is time for a lesson.'

So up to the bird he did walk,
And the bird had not given thought,

'That perhaps this boy
Would kick me quite fierce.'
The bird would go sailing, no squawk.

The boy lumbered over to look.
He was oh so startled, he shook.
The bird lay broken,
From beak twas spoken,
'My life that was given, you took.'

'Boy, now you've done, gone, and did it.
Crime you commit, I forbid it:
That you will not know
What creatures would think
The tongue of beasts: I now gift it.'

And from that day forth, the boy changed.
No creature he knew without name.
The birds and the bees,
Dogs, cats, and people,
Though people thought he was deranged.

Life was then filled up with meaning.
To know ev'rything had feeling:
if sorrow and joy,
or lonely, afraid,
All with a voice was worth hearing."

And there it was: my own grand story. Perhaps it can also be made into a movie. I hope that they might cast the child as young Macaulay Culkin, and when he punts the tiny flying friend, he puts his hands to his cheeks and opens his mouth wide to shout, "Oh noooo!" The movie will end when he learns the lesson. Who cares about the life after?

“That was one my old Uncle Timothy Bojangles used to tell us kids.” I pretend to choke up and my voice comes out stifled by invisible tears. “It still gets me every time.”

“Birds can’t talk.” he tells me.

“Maybe not to you. Have you tried listening? It takes a special ear.” I take the flashlight from my side and shine it on his face. He cringes for a moment and squints his eyes toward me.

“I can’t say that I have,” he replies in an even tone.

“Can ghosts talk to birds? Can ghosts hear birds? I’ve never met a ghost.”

“Neither have I.” He smiles.

I feel particularly haunted right now. Something about this Roger strikes me as strange. I stand up and take a step back. My flashlight focuses on his being. How do I figure this out. Do I start naming random demons? See if it makes him disappear? If I close my eyes, turn the flashlight off and on, and open my eyes again, will he disappear? I stare at him closely. He appears human enough. No chains... He has not been floating this entire time... No faint blue glow...

I close my eyes, turn the flashlight off and on, and open my eyes again. He remains.

“Did you think I would disappear?” He stands to his feet in one fluid movement--his head moving upward as if to pull the rest of his body up. A thump and shudder sounds distant in the sewers and develops to a slow rumbling echo that carries to where we stand. I turn my flashlight away for a moment in hopes to catch a glimpse of this unfamiliar source of noise to which I may re-concrete myself into reality. There is nothing. Oh well. Can’t say I was much of one for reality, anyway.

I turn my flashlight back to him. He remains. He stands slightly hunched with his arms wrapped around his torso in a tight embrace, knuckles whitening with an ever increasing grip. Grand baby, who is left to hold you? With eyes closed shut and beard a-quiver, his head raises up to observe the void where a ceiling should be.

“I’m dead, believe me, but I am no ghost. We shook hands, did we not? I’m not sure there’s much more corporeal than that.” He chuckles. “You wouldn’t believe it, but I wonder sometimes myself. I wonder if we’re not all just ghosts passing by one another in the midst of one huge, eternal car crash. I wonder if you, Butts, are not a ghost--some sort of figment left to haunt me in this forsaken place. A hallucination. A manufacturing within a half of my mind to provide an escape from the other half. My thoughts are too large right now.”

His feet had begun to wander as he spoke. He obviously walked nowhere in particular—he just sort of drifted. Floating ghostlike. Real talk, Butts--am I encountering his apparition? Is he

wandering back to where and when he was? Back to his old home? Back to the origin of all of us? Grand baby, little bat, let us settle down in this darkness and savor the moment.

“No, friend, I would think your thoughts are right where they should be.” I feel my body relax and a joyful smile creeps across my face. “Why do we worry so much about the day to day and the small self inadequacies that haunt us? I’m still down here to find a lost dog that is who-knows-where. She’s my responsibility and I’ve searched all over for her. But let us take a moment--a moment to cherish this little sewer hall, unknown to virtually everyone but ourselves, and be. You and me existing. As ghosts, or Roger and Butts, or whatever.”

This enclosing space begins to open up. His wanderings seem to take him further and further from myself, causing our persons to fill up the void as it is created. I want to invite him to dance. I want to foxtrot to the music he creates with his voice. I want to bark and howl and run through the sewers inviting every rat into our pack until we create our own subterranean society of love and camaraderie finding lost dogs and people and life and playing Mungo Jerry for the rest of time. Yes, that is the life.

He continues to float aimlessly. His body is detached. “I have no plans on leaving, and I’ll admit I enjoy your company.” He pauses for a moment and I hear a brief chuckled exhalation come from his mouth. “Thank you for listening to my story, by the way. I’m not sure when that happened last. There is nothing within or about me that is worth pursuing. I am the wind that whispers in your ear, telling you all there is to know about people and the world.” He is staring out into the growing emptiness. His lips form a smile and he speaks. “I am the wind.”

“Yes, and thank you for listening to mine.” I humbly offer. I join him in the voided stare. “I’m not sure anyone has ever questioned, let alone listened to, my story in its full account. Most dismiss it immediately as nonsense. In honesty, I’m not really sure if birds can talk.”

His focus remains apart from me. “I have very little doubt that they can. I’m sure they beautiful things to say.” He laughs. “I would like to ask them about you, some time. We can see who is the better story teller.”

He remains silent for a moment. A small snuffle escapes from his fortress. “I appreciate you coming down here. If there is a God, He has sent you. No ever-present benevolent force would leave me here to die alone drowning in sadness. You are the one person I’ve been searching for in a 10 year endeavor.” His gaze returns to me. He takes a moment to look me up and down, taking note of my palm-treed button down shirt with chest hair showing, my dark green cargo shorts with pockets a-full, bare feet despite the muck in which we both tread. “I have come down to the spot you found

me in a state of disillusion to die. Even in this clarity, if it can be called that, I am ready to pass. More so now that I have met you, actually. I have reached the conclusion that I've sought." He spreads his arms wide. "The legendary crescendo in my life song."

He drifts further without giving any indication for purposeful action or intention. His grin turns into a wide, beaming smile and opens to produce a death sentence. His eyes chink and fog up with the beginning mist of tears.

Come now, grand baby. Who am I to you? My face straightens and my fists clench.

"Oh yes, you are so lucky. Then shall I say goodbye already?" I approach him with measured step.

"Yes, friend." He looks to me and stares intently into my eyes, smiling all the while. "Yes, Butts. I'm sorry. I think that it may be time. You are a dear friend to me. I hope you do not feel used. Our connection is not served for me alone. If you feel nothing already, then you will in time. There is no way that this moment cannot carry gravity for us both."

I continue to move towards him, relaxing my body as I get closer to his body adrift. I open my arms in a seeming embrace. "You are correct, my friend. It is quite the momentous occasion, and I cannot feel luckier for having happened upon you."

Roger opens his arms to return my farewell embrace. The space begins to withdraw and the room closes back into its normal shape. The darkness, the dirty smell, the damp air replaces the beautiful rotten people. My fist moves quickly from my side to my shoulder. With the quickness of a wolf reaching forth to rip a throat from a deer, my knuckles reach his nose and dear Roger drops to the floor.

"Yes quite lucky," I pronounce.

His time is not yet done on this Earth, I've decided. If I am sent by God, as Roger had said, then my motivations are godly. If the world is to change from the place that has destroyed such a striking man, then it requires people like himself to change it. We are creatures of habit and mimicry. We follow those that bleed success and visible happiness.

Grand baby, beautiful child, show the world how you've grown. Show them that your clothes have grown old with your body, but you need neither—That even when they are rugged and scarred, they remain intact all the same and detract nothing from you. I'm sorry to betray you, grand baby, but I will be bringing you back up to the world.

I mentally prepare for the journey back to the sewer grate ladder from which I entered. I bend down to pick up Roger's limp body. My hands fumble around his sides to get a firm grasp. I

smell his putrice that emanates even beyond the horrible vapor of the sewer. I bury my face in his chest and firm my legs. One, two, three, I throw him up on my shoulder. I pat his back. There, there, grand baby. We will take you home to the house you've grown so distant from.

I begin tracing back the route I came. Shoot, what about Daria? Precious Dasha? I let forth three drawn out signalling whines that might alert a dog to another suffering dog. Those should carry best, I think. There is no response. I'm sorry Dasha. This has been an eventful sewer-venture full of difficult decisions, and this is one more that I am making. May you find your way back to the home from where you are so dearly missed. If that is not for you, I hope that you find a new home-- perhaps down here in the sewers. Can you collect the rats and form an organized society? I will bring the Mungo Jerry records and my dream can come too.

I'm sorry to you too, Roger. This choice is not your's but mine. It will be your choice to stay. If you really believe this to be such a momentous occasion, such a moment of impact, then you will not be upset.