

# Mutton

I've always loved the amber darkness. Once-busy roads bathed in the golden gloom of street lights. The city, her secrets mine and mine alone as her people slumbered. That submarine-shaped crack in the pavement, that willowing branch jutting too far out above the asphalt, that scurrying rat, that errant roach, the best of friends, all of them, and me sharing in their camaraderie for a fleeting moment. As a blood cell carried along urban veins, a tiny cog in something much larger than myself, and the calm liberty to bask in the awareness.

I tend to romanticise midnight strolls, but it's only because they're so romantic.

There was nothing romantic about the night I met Mutton.

It had been a long day. Long enough that my mind didn't wander with my legs. The apathy of a tiring day is a sad thing. Joy and wonder give way not to misery or boredom, but to *nothing*; a brimming hollowness. So the first time I saw a certain scruffy little dog yipping at me from an alley leading to the underside of a bridge, I ignored it. While the yips sounded territorial at first, I wondered whether they turned glum at the sight of me walking away. I didn't think much of it.

The next time I saw that same dog, standing next to it was a man. The dog seemed to be in good cheer this time, as was I. It was clear that man and dog both lived under the bridge. The man's face was shaggier than the entire dog, but both were equally unkempt. I approached.

"Does the dog have a name?"

"Mrngh."

"I know that all words are just noises, but that one seemed more noise than word."

"Mngh."

"Do *you* have a name?"

"Namesurr for folk that need callin'."

"So what do I call you?"

"Mrngh."

"I'm going to call you Grunt."

"Mutton. 'Er name's Mutton."

"Mutton?"

"Mrngh. 'S long for Mutt."

“I met her the other night. She barked me all the way down to 7th Street.”

“I’ll half to eat ‘er to shutter up.”

“Well I don’t think it’ll come to that. Look, she’s wagging her tail.”

“Mrng.”

“We’re going to be friends, aren’t we Mutton? Attagirl.”

For a time, I wasn’t worried about fleas or ticks or washing my hands. Grunt retreated to his nest under the bridge. Mutton grew bored of me soon after she’d gotten her fill of ear scratches. She joined Grunt. I came back with washed hands, a sandwich for Grunt, and a packet of biscuits for Mutton. Grunt stared at me for a short while. Did he narrow his eyes? I couldn’t tell. He took the sandwich from me. As he ate, he picked out little chunks and fed them to Mutton. I felt like I was intruding. I held up the biscuits and set them down where he could see them. Grunt, well, grunted. I left. Mutton gave me a parting yip.

Life went on, an ever-skewed mix of good and bad and hollow days. On lazy days, I’d find the time to sit with Grunt and talk. Grunt mostly listened. Sometimes he’d tell me about how Mutton would catch rats for them, and how he’d slow roast them over an open flame and how Mutt likes them crispy. “So do I,” he’d say. I’d tell him about how man wasn’t meant to be tied to a desk, about how our brains still function as that of a hunter, a gatherer. “We aren’t built for what the world is today,” I’d say. Grunt rarely understood.

On average days, I’d wave to Grunt, give Mutton a few quick pets and be on my way. On the busy days, Mutton would yip for attention and I would barely hear.

Then the monsoon came and the bridge flooded. Grunt’s possessions, accumulated through years of attrition from society, were washed away. I tried giving him some money, but he waved it away. He said no place would let him in where he could spend it. I brought Mutton a bag of dog food and told Grunt not to eat it himself, and that I’d bring him fresh food as often as I could, that he needed *human* nutrition. The next time I visited, his breath smelled of dog food.

There had been no lazy days for a very long time. I could barely keep myself afloat. I tried the homeless shelter nearby. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. I was just one person. A person with my own livelihood to worry about. I can’t possibly provide for a whole other person by myself. What was the system doing? When I heard back, none of it sounded like anything more than empty promises.

I took a day off work. I decided to spend it under the bridge. When I got there, Grunt was roasting a singular rat over a small fire. When the smoke reached my nostrils, I stepped to the side and violently threw up; strange, because it just smelled like meat.

I asked him to stop and told him I'd be back with real food. I set my bag down, took just my cards and left. When I came back, I saw Grunt rummaging through my wallet, taking some cash out. He saw me and immediately froze. I realised I'd never seen true desperation before.

"It's fer Mutton, y'see. Broke 'er leg chasin' this damn rat."

"You could've just asked me, Grunt."

Grunt said nothing. Not even a grunt.

"Look, I'll take her to the vet. I got you some Chinese food. You eat, and I'll bring Mutton back, good as new."

Mutton's leg needed a splint. She was so scared. The clinic refused to see her without a thorough wash, which cost...good god, that's expensive! As I was bringing her back to Grunt, she seemed so weak in my arms, her yip almost soundless. But in the coming days, she started looking stronger. Those exorbitant shots at the vet must have been helping. But she was the only tenant of the underside-of-the-bridge getting better. Grunt had never looked *healthy* for as long as I'd known him, but his malnutrition was reaching withering heights.

Nothing crystallised on the shelter front. The next time I sat playing with Mutton under the bridge, I talked about the unfairness of it all. Grunt seemed to understand. I talked about how I feel responsible, how the world *makes* me feel responsible, when in reality, a single person has only so much control. Grunt just listened.

Lazy days were becoming near impossible to come by. There wasn't much I could do. So I worried. And I wrote emails. More platitudes. And suddenly, the world was on fire.

It was a long, long time before I was allowed to see sunlight again. People around the world died by the thousands, millions. So much suffering everywhere. But Mutton was always on my mind. How her ears perked up when she saw me heading her way. How she'd loose a satisfied growl when I scratched her chin just right. How she'd rub up on my legs in thanks whenever I brought Grunt food. How she'd let out her little yip. God, I missed her yip.

It had been a long, long time since I'd seen Mutton. The second I was able to, I made for the bridge. With the newfound freedom, *everyone* was out in hordes. Simply because they could be. The noise of civilisation was unbearable.

I reached the bridge. No yip greeted me. I saw the grubby silhouette of a man, outlined by the fire he was facing, his back to the alley.

"Grunt?"

No answer. The man appeared to be shaking. I inched closer. When I crossed over, I saw that he had a lump of meat turning over the flame; too large to be a rat. The fire was warm, yet Grunt was shaking. A sudden image flashed into my mind, unbidden. It was a memory of the first time I'd seen Grunt and Mutton after the flood. On the tail of the rains, the temperature was barely

above survivable. A busy day, but I'd been able to spare a glance towards the bridge's underside. Shivering uncontrollably himself, I'd seen Grunt reach over and put his only remaining tattered jacket over Mutton, before curling up next to her. The image faded.

"Grunt, where's Mutton?"

No answer.

"Mutton! Here, girl! Mutton!"

No yip greeted me.

Despite the traffic overhead, Grunt's quiet sobs were deafening.