

The Otter Detectives

*The Story of the Otter*

By Sarah Hancock

With an A5 notepad in one hand and a fine black ink pen in the other, Detective River begins to scribble his well thought theories onto the page. The pen drags forward and backward in a frantic motion, accompanied by deep thinking stares into the distance. Up ahead we spy Detective Meadow, cautiously and curiously sifting through the long, emerald grass blades, making certain nothing has been missed. A pretty sure bet for this experienced detective duo, who have been solving puzzling mysteries together for over fifteen years. River and Meadow are the best in the business. Specialising in the creature crime department, there isn't a curious case they haven't faced.

"Nothing over here," calls Meadow, popping her head up and dusting her hands. "Are you sure this is the area that was reported?"

"According to the witness reports, this is one of the spots," replies River, this time stroking his chin in a reflective manner. "It was all found along the footpath which runs adjacent to the water."

When it comes to crimes of the creature sort, nothing surprises the pair. From swindling seagulls stealing ice cream and battered sausages to mischievous minks breaking into burrows, they have seen it all. Their cases have brought fines, arrests and community service charges across the Vale, with justice served and creature criminals banged up behind bars.

"Maybe we should check further up," suggests Meadow, pointing toward the banks of the meandering water.

The case has taken the detectives to the river's edge, but this time, it's not seagulls or minks which are terrorising the locals. Over the past few weeks, the pair have received a high volume of complaints from human residents within the area. According to many who live here, someone or something is vandalising the nearby landscape. At first, the duo assumed the vandalism would be in the form of charred grass from disposal barbecues or perhaps excessive amounts of littering, but they soon discovered this particular case is a lot more, well, pungent!

"One report has described it smelling like jasmine tea, with a hint of fish," replies River. "Maybe, we should simply follow our noses?"

"It's not a bad idea River," replies Meadow, readily preparing her nose. "Not a bad idea at all!"

River swiftly places his notepad and pen into his cream coloured pocket. Shifting his deerstalker hat to one side, he places his nostrils facing the air and begins to sniff. After several long and drawn out snorts, Meadow joins his side and the pair stand static, simply whiffing.

"Are you getting anything, Meadow?" Detective River asks after a couple of minutes pass by.

"A faint smell, River," she replies, "but that could just be your aftershave."

“Maybe, we should move up stream and try to pick up a stronger scent?” River suggests, to which Meadow hastily agrees.

“Sounds like a plan, but let’s stay in front of the wind,” she suggests.

Stood one behind the other, like soldiers reporting for duty, the pair begin to waddle in line with the water’s edge, paying close attention to the surrounding scents as they go. A hint of cherry blossom laps from one direction, a note of pine from the other, but these detectives are searching for spraint. A dark, green, slimy substance and the droppings belonging to a particular creature. As the pair carry on their sniffing patrol along the banks, something is revealed up ahead.

“There’s one!” cries Meadow, pointing straight ahead at a slimy deposit sprawled across the nearby footpath. “Let’s seal off the area!”

The pair spring into action, cordoning off the potential evidence with blue and white tape stashed in a vintage briefcase. The duo take care to protect their fingerprints, each placing a pair of latex gloves upon their hands. River reaches into the case, revealing a small, rectangular shaped camera. He slowly snaps the evidence from a variety of angles and once happy with the images gathered, he places the camera back into the case.

“What are you thinking Meadow?” questions Detective River. “Is it consistent with the report notes?”

“It certainly is,” replies Meadow. “Same colour, same texture and dare I say it, same smell.”

“My thoughts exactly detective,” agrees River. “The question is, why would someone want to smear this all over the local area?”

This was a fact. The complaints all revealed a similar narrative. Strange pieces of dark green droppings, in a continuous spread, along the length of the footpath.

“It’s a sure sign of vandalism no doubt, but why smear such a thing everywhere? What happened to good old graffiti?” questions a pondering Meadow.

“Are we still thinking it’s the creature discussed this morning over coffee?” asks River.

“Well,” replies Meadow. “There’s only one way to find out!”

With that, Meadow takes a huge inhale and holds her breath tightly. She bends down toward the substance and reluctantly picks up the evidence with one fail swoop. River places his hand over his mouth in pure disgust as

Meadow takes a closer inspection. After a few seconds of deeper evaluating, Meadow places her hand into the pungent dropping, much to the horror of her colleague. Carefully, she dissects the spraint, still holding her breath and like a surgeon on the operating table, pulls out a bone from within.

“What is that?” cries River, bemused and a little disgusted by what he has seen.

“It’s a fish bone,” replies Meadow, desperately catching her breath.

“Why does it look so peculiar?” questions River.

Meadow takes her finger, thankfully still protected by the latex glove and runs it along the freshly removed fish bone. She glances down at the black, oily remnants left on her fingers, rubbing them together to reveal a sticky substance.

“It’s oil,” she reveals, “how strange.”

Earlier that morning, the detective pair had come to the conclusion that only one creature could make such a unique smelling spraint and that would be the otter. With strong tails, streamlined bodies and residing near the water’s edge, the detectives believed the otters to be behind this peculiar act of vandalism, but why?

“Well if the fish bones aren’t pointing in the direction of the otter, then I don’t know what is,” summaries a certain River. “I guess we will stake out here overnight, catch the suspect in the act and arrest them. Do you agree Meadow?”

Meadow transfixed by the oily clue pays no attention to her colleague.

“Meadow? Did you hear me?”

“Something doesn’t add up,” replies a puzzled Meadow. “We need to find more spraint.”

“More?” questions a confused River. “Surely this is enough evidence alone to arrest an otter.”

Meadow, now motivated by the latest clue, dives into the briefcase, pulling out report notes on the complaints filed by locals within the area. She shuffles through the papers and begins reading aloud.

“Mrs Moore says she was taking her dog Betsy for a walk around seven thirty yesterday evening, when she stepped on a strange substance smeared across the footpath. When taking her shoe off to rub it on the nearby grass, she discovered more fishy smelling spraint along the water’s edge.”

“Where is this going Meadow?” questions River.

“Look!” cries Meadow, pointing again at the case notes in front of her. “ Mr Monroe says he was taking his daily stroll along the footpath last week, when he too stepped in a large fishy smelling pile. Isn’t it intriguing that the spraints have been mostly left on the footpath, where humans walk each day?,” summaries Meadow.

“Exactly!” cries River. “A hate crime against humans! The otters must be stopped!”

“But what if it’s not a crime River? What if it’s a cry for help,” Meadow exclaims. “We have to find more pool!”

Grabbing the suitcase, Meadow swiftly hurries along the footpath, sniffing intensely as she goes. River scrambles to catch up with her, a little perplexed by the events currently unfolding. Before long, the pair stumble upon a second pile of droppings, placed proudly on the footpath, just as the detective predicted. Pulling on her latex glove once again, Meadow wastes no time in giving the spraint a closer inspection, discovering another mysterious piece of this otter shaped puzzle. Once again, she removes a foreign object from the droppings, this time, in the shape of a note.

“Please keep the noise down,” reads Meadow aloud.

“Who?” asks a confused River. “Who needs to keep the noise down?”

“That’s what the note says,” replies Meadow. “And look, it’s signed with a print of some sort.”

“Let me see,” instructs River, this time taking the sour smelling note into his own hands.

Sat on the bottom, just like a small signature, was the footprint of a creature.

“Webbed, five toes, a large rear pad and I’d say around nine centimetres long,” lists River as he investigates the evidence. “Well, it’s certainly not a seagull again.”

“I have a hunch!” replies Meadow. “Come on!”

With that, Meadow dives for the briefcase once more and continues to move at speed along the footpath. She is closely followed by her now very confused colleague, who is attempting to stuff the note into an evidence bag as he goes.

“Meadow! What is going on?” he cries.

“Just follow the footpath and keep sniffing!”

Along the footpath the duo head, sniffing and whiffing for any jasmine tea scents. Eventually, after a few minutes of searching they discover a third spraint, unsurprisingly left in plain sight along the footpath. Following suit, Meadow prepares her latex glove and dives straight into the slimy substance. As she delicately roots around, she seems to hit something. With great care and precision she removes her hand from the spraint to reveal a miniscule object, almost impossible to see.

“River, the magnifying glass please,” she instructs.

From the briefcase, River pulls the important detective tool and hands it to his colleague. Meadow begins to scan the tiny object, now enlarged by the glass lens.

“Well?” asks River. “What is it?”

“It’s plastic, detective,” she reveals, “a very small piece of plastic.”

“Does this mean anything?” ponders River.

By this point, the theory Detective Meadow laid out in her head, seemed to be adding up. From the unique, pungent smell, the spraint had clearly been left by an otter, but as Meadow suspected, this wasn’t vandalism and it most certainly was not a crime.

“The otter that left this spraint, wanted humans to find it. It’s trying to tell us an important message.”

“Through its poo?” a puzzled River cries.

“Yes! I must admit, it seemed a rather obscure theory at first, but many years ago, before you and I worked together, I had a similar case.”

Meadow wasn’t wrong. Her time in the creature crime department was long and extensive, and her knowledge second to none.

“Around twenty years ago, we wrongfully arrested an otter for antisocial behaviour,” she explains. “When taking into the station for further questioning, I soon discovered that leaving droppings is quite the norm for otters. This particular suspect explained that he uses his droppings to send messages to others.”

“Really?” cries River, “what ever happened to a normal hand written letter?”

“What is even more intriguing, River, is that us humans can tell a lot from otter droppings,” explains Meadow. “Information about water quality, diet, otter numbers for example, but what is fascinating, is in this particular case, they are leaving the spraint not in their usual areas, but directly on footpaths.”

“It’s rather disgusting if you ask me,” responds River. “I think we should find the culprit and be done with this case.”

“But River,” pleads Meadow, “don’t you see! They are leaving them on the footpath because that’s where humans walk each day. They want us to step in the droppings to decipher their message!”

“But, what would an otter even need to say or ask humans?” questions River. “How much is it for a tin of mackerel these days?”

Meadow rolls her eyes at her colleague’s ignorance, not to mention his failed attempt at cracking a humorous joke.

“Look,” she explains, holding up the previously found fish bone. “This bone is covered in oil, which means somewhere in the water, there must be pollution. This affects the fish and then in turn affects the otter. And this,” she exclaims, showcasing the small piece of plastic, “this means that the river is filled with items that shouldn’t be there. Litter, plastic!”

“Yes,” mulls River, “this is making a bit more sense. But what about the note? Keep the noise down?”

“Well, think about it. The otters were here in the rivers, long before this footpath appeared. Suddenly, their peaceful and tranquil life has been filled with human noise - scooters, bikes, people chatting on their mobile phones,” replies Meadow.

“Ah,” replies River, this time pulling his notepad and pen from back out of the cream coloured pocket. “This is exactly the theory I had before we discovered any of these spraints.”

Detective Meadow rolls her eyes again. She is used to River’s antics, but takes secret pride in knowing she is the brains behind this crime busting duo.

“So,” questions River. “What do we do now?”

“Well,” replies Meadow, “I can confidently say there is no crime committed here and our attention is no longer needed. I would however like to raise this issue with the local neighborhood. Do we still have all the details of those who filed a vandalism complaint?”

“We do indeed,” replies River. “All one hundred and fifty two of them.”

“Excellent,” cries Meadow. “Then your job will be visiting each and every one of them to explain the situation and provide them with further information on what they can do to assist the otters. Community litter pick ups, quiet walking times, that sort of thing.”

“Me?” cries an alarmed River. “Isn’t that what the people in the office are for?”

“No River,” replies a satisfied Meadow, “the case isn’t closed just yet my friend. Besides, think of all the lovely cups of tea you’ll get.”

“And what are you going to do whilst I’m doing that?” questions a deflated River.

“Continue to solve creature shaped crime of course,” replies Meadow. “Now if you could also collect up the spraint to take back to headquarters with us, that would be spiffing.”

Meadow removes her latex gloves and dusts her hands proudly. Being a detective means sniffing out the innocent, as well as the guilty sometimes. With confidence that this otter shaped case can be put to bed, the detective picks up her briefcase and begins to head back along the footpath.

“Meadow, could you give me a hand?” calls River.

Not paying any attention to his desperate cries, Meadow disappears, leaving a flustered River, juggling and fumbling the dark green coloured droppings in an attempt to catch her up. As the bumbling colleague follows the same route as Meadow, back to the station a small rustle in the nearby grass is heard.

Tucked safely in the emerald blades, sit two little blinking eyes. A small snout covered with wispy whiskers twitches up and down. As the sun begins to draw on another curious case, a gentle whisper can be heard from the hidden creature before vanishing into the cool ripples of the water.

“Thank you Detectives.”

Around three o'clock, yesterday afternoon, several phonecalls were made to detective headquarters.

Perhaps there is something which could

This brand new case has left him feeling rather perplexed, but as always, this detective is determined to get to the bottom

Detective River and Detective Meadow