

REAL *by Stephen Roth*

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We think this cross-generational fairy tale is pure magic. We don't know how he did it but there is a freshness and unspoiled innocence here that plays upon our emotions with child-like guile. In the simplest language Roth renders a magic world that is utterly believable and we happily find ourselves bewitched by the illusion. Spoiler: at the end, a couple of us even had tears in our eyes. Awww. Quote: "Will you buy me some cigarettes?" I sighed. "I've told you, you can't smoke. You're a beloved children's book character. It just wouldn't be right. Besides, how would you hold it? You're imaginary, remember." Five stars.*

I'd like to introduce you to a very special friend of mine, Gilford Monkey-Butt. Yes, for those wondering, that is his real name. What kind of mother would bestow upon a child such a horrifically awful name? The six year old kind that isn't actually a mother at all. Oh, and Gilford is no child, either.

Gilford is... well, there's no other way to say it, a nearly six foot tall, five hundred pound, talking gorilla. How are such things possible you may be asking? Simple. Anything is possible in the mind of a child. I created Gilford when I was six years old and he's never left my side, though I often wish he had. How old am I now? Old enough not to have an imaginary talking gorilla for a best friend. Old enough that I have to hide my best friend from my own children.

For the record I realize now that gorillas aren't actually monkeys but rather apes. I know now that the name makes little sense, but come on, I was six. Six year olds don't know the difference between apes and monkeys, or at least this six year old didn't. You can't exactly change an imaginary gorilla's name without him getting angry. You wouldn't want to see Gilford angry, he is a gorilla after all.

I know that it's strange for a grown man to have an imaginary friend, especially one that's a talking gorilla. Gilford just won't go away. I've tried leaving him at the zoo with the rest of his kind to no avail. He looks at the normal gorillas behind the glass in the manmade habitat, then looks at me with contempt.

"Is this how you see me, Dave? Is this what I am to you? The dude with the silver back won't even talk to me. What am I supposed to do with that?" Gilford said, tapping the glass.

"Don't tap the glass, they hate that."

Gilford raised an eyebrow. "How would you know, Dave? You've spent your whole life with a gorilla and suddenly you're an expert?"

"Does this mean that you're not staying?" I said, holding my breath.

"How about you stay with Hank the silent alpha male? Besides, I doubt he'd get my Johnny Carson impression."

"Gilford, I don't even get your Johnny impression and I've known you for thirty years."

Gilford took mock offense. "Are you saying it isn't good, Dave?"

"Of course it's good," I said, with my hands raised. Pissing off a five hundred pound imaginary gorilla was the last thing I wanted to do.

"Come on, Gilford, let's go home."

"Will you buy me some cigarettes?"

I sighed. "I've told you, you can't smoke. You're a beloved children's book character. It just wouldn't be right. Besides, how would you hold it? You're imaginary, remember?"

"So what you're saying is that all you have to do is imagine me with a cigarette? Then, boom! I'm a smoking gorilla."

"I suppose it works like that, yeah."

"Do it."

"I'm leaving."

Gilford was right behind me upon exiting the gorilla sanctuary.

So what do you do when you're an adult with an imaginary talking gorilla for a best friend? Turn him into a beloved children's book character of course. Gilford Monkey-Butt is the star of four best-selling picture books for kids. In the books he goes by the name Gilford Monkey-Bottom, because, you know, parents. The lovable Gilford has gone rollerblading and swimming in the ocean. A visit to the zoo to see other gorillas is the next planned adventure for the literary version of my friend.

The Gilford that appears in the picture books is a whole lot more likeable than the gorilla that I share my life with now. The Gilford that appears in the books is much like the Gilford that was my friend at the age of six. He's naïve and a bit clumsy, asking lots of questions while also suffering some comical mishaps. Unfortunately, the real Gilford grew out of that stage quite some time ago. The gorilla I share my life with now is sarcastic with a sense of humor that isn't suitable for children. The fame and fortune of being the basis for a beloved children's book character has gone straight to his head. Sharing your life with a five hundred pound gorilla with an ego of equal mass isn't fun.

Life with Gilford hasn't been easy over the years, but I've done what I can to make my friend happy. The trouble now is he wants something that I cannot possibly give him. Gilford has

always been a contributor to the antics of his literary persona. The children's books are more of a collaboration between two friends than a single writer. With the books growing popularity my friend would like his contributions to be known publically.

We've talked about this at length with Gilford giving little ground. I've explained that since Gilford is an imaginary gorilla he cannot have literary credit for the work that he has done. Furthermore, I've explained that since he is a product of my woefully demented imagination I, therefore, receive his credit as well. As you can imagine this didn't go over very well with Gilford. This led to the biggest argument that I have ever had with my best friend of thirty years. The yelling and screaming coming from my office, where I was supposed to be alone, caused my wife to poke her head in the room. Sometimes I think she doubts my sanity. As do I.

During that argument with my imaginary friend a very real point was made by Gilford. He has long grown tired of living in someone else's shadow. He wishes to be his own person, in a matter of speaking of course, since he is, in fact, a gorilla. The thoughts that he has are uniquely his and his alone he points out. Without him I wouldn't have the career, house, car, money, wife and children that I have. These things are mine, not

his. Long has my friend kept his desires to have such things silent.

"Gilford, you're not even real," I said, throwing up my hands.

"No, I'm not, Dave. I feel shackled to your very existence because you are my creator. Without you I don't exist. That's why I followed you from the zoo. My heart yearns for the freedom that only your kind possess," Gilford said in his deep voice.

"What are you saying to me?"

"I have grown weary of this imaginary life that you have bestowed upon me, Dave. I want to be real."

Words caught in my throat for a moment. "I don't know how to do that, Gilford."

"Neither do I, Dave, neither do I," Gilford said with a shake of his massive head.

Gilford then did something that he hadn't done since joining my side at the age of six. He disappeared.

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Once Gilford was gone I realized just how much I loved that old gorilla. I expected him to come back once he had some time

to think. We hadn't spent a day apart since I dreamed him up at the age of six. It was like I didn't know what to do with myself without him. The longer he stayed gone the worse it got. I had wished him gone for so long that I never realized how boring my life would be without him.

I found myself sitting at my desk staring at a blank computer screen. The blank screen was all I had seen in the weeks since Gilford flew the coop. I was supposed to be working on the latest adventures of Gilford Monkey-Bottom. However, without my faithful writing companion I hadn't been able to write a single usable word. There was no other way to say it, without my best friend I was blocked.

Months passed without any sign of Gilford Monkey-Butt. Rather demoralized by the prospect of never seeing my best friend again, I eventually found the words. My writing wasn't the same without the gorilla by my side. The result in the finished manuscript was evident. It was by far the worst piece that I had ever written. It was barely good enough to hold the not so prestigious Gilford Monkey-Bottom name. My publishers agreed that there was something very different about this story and promptly asked why. I didn't have the heart to tell them that I had lost the inspiration for the stories when my best friend left me. I promised to rework the story. They instead

theorized that I should hold a series of readings to get a feel for how the public received the piece. I reluctantly agreed to read my worst manuscript in a public forum. It would be far from my finest moment as a writer.

In a crowded downtown auditorium a sea of eyes watched as I read a children's book. The big room was silent except for the sound of my voice over the speaker. I have always hated doing publicity stunts like this. Reading a children's book to hundreds of people always made me feel like I was a kindergarten teacher with far too many students. Finding myself standing in front of a large group of people wasn't my favorite place to be either. My place is behind a keyboard, that's where I prefer to stay.

I read the last line and closed the book on the podium. I stared at the book for a moment in preparation of my least favorite portion of these events. The Q&A segment. It's not that I don't appreciate or want to hear from the fans, because I do. They're the reason I have gotten to make a living hanging out with an imaginary gorilla. I'm a writer so people expect me to be eloquent and well spoken, giving off an aura of intelligence. Well, I write children's picture books starring a talking gorilla so you can throw intelligence right out of the window. Secondly, I'm a writer not a public speaker. I'd much rather write my

answer down than speak off of the top of my head. That doesn't work in front of three hundred people, however.

During these readings Gilford usually sits on the edge of the stage with his feet hanging off. While I read he listens intently just as the audience members listen. When the time comes for the Q&A portion of the evening Gilford will stand beside me at the podium answering questions aloud as I answer them as well. Of course the audience cannot hear his answers, though because I can, I find it distracting to say the least. As I answer questions on this evening I cannot help but miss my big friend's antics. It's funny how you don't miss someone until they're gone, even if that someone is imaginary.

A rather timid looking man stands before the microphone with his hands in his pockets. His question catches me off-guard.

"What do you say to the rumors that your main character, Gilford Monkey-Bottom, is based off a childhood imaginary friend?" the man said, while jingling keys in his pockets.

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. As I am turning responses to this question over in my head I notice movement at the far end of the stage. Sitting on the edge of the stage, swinging his feet is my old friend. Gilford is staring at me as he awaits my answer to the question posed.

As our eyes meet for the first time in months I realize just what must be done. I can feel the audience's unease as they watch me, waiting for my answer. They cannot see the five hundred pound gorilla sitting on the edge of the stage. If they could I know they wouldn't be gazing at me with frustration. When a large gorilla is in the room often he draws attention, at least he always has for me.

I cross the stage, emotions beginning to well up in my chest as I approach my old friend. Gilford is watching me very intently now, his legs have stopped swinging and he remains very still. Without saying a word I sit down beside him on the edge of the stage. I start to swing my feet as if I were a little kid, soon I hear a laugh from Gilford as he joins in.

When I speak I do so softly not caring whether my words reach passed the first couple of rows. These words are meant more for my lifelong friend than any audience member.

"When I was six years old I didn't really have any friends. I was a shy and awkward child even by my own admission. Tired of the loneliness that came with being the only child to parents that would soon divorce, I created a friend. An imaginary friend, if you will. But Gilford Monkey-Butt, as I have always called him, has never been imaginary to me. He's been more real to me than most of the people in my life over the years. A true

friend is what he is. I wish I could say that I have treated the five-hundred pound gorilla in the same fashion, but I cannot."

I look over at Gilford for a moment. I've never known whether gorillas could cry. Now I've got my answer. With tears now in my own eyes I turn my attention back to the audience, who is listening in hushed silence.

"The book series has always been a joint venture between two minds, though only one of us has an author credit. Without my imaginary friend of thirty years there wouldn't be a Gilford Monkey-Bottom series for children to enjoy. The book I just read is very different than the ones that preceded it. It's just not that good. Believe me, I know, I wrote it after all. This is the first of the books that Gilford didn't help write.

"For the record, yes, I know how strange it is for a grown man to admit to having an imaginary friend. Therein lies the problem, imaginary. Gilford doesn't want to be imaginary anymore. He wants to be real. Perhaps all of you can help with that."

I can feel Gilford's eyes boring into me, but I dare not look or I'll lose my nerve.

"Close your eyes. Go ahead and close them."

I waited a few moments for the audience to comply. Once I was satisfied that every eye in the crowd was closed I continued.

"I'd like to take you back to the age of six, when your imagination was teeming with life and your creativity was boundless. I have always believed that anything is possible in the mind of a child. Today I need three hundred six-year-olds to perform a miracle for Gilford.

"Your mother just set down a plate of milk and cookies on the dining room table to cheer you up. You don't have many friends, but you'd like to have more. Tired of waiting for a real one you decide to create an imaginary friend. He'd be there when others won't. He'd listen when everyone else ignored. He'd even love you when it seemed like everyone else hated you. Why do you choose a gorilla for your best friend? Because you're six-years-old and why not?

"Remember how possible everything seemed when you were six-years-old? You could do anything, right? You just had to have imagination. Well, I need it now. Let's make Gilford real, ladies and gentlemen. Now open your eyes and see my friend for the first time."

My eyes had also been closed while I walked the audience through the imagery. I opened them and studied the crowd. A man

on the front row gasped in surprise. Several people rub their eyes as if in disbelief. A murmur starts to grow throughout the audience. People are standing up and pointing to the spot on the stage to my right.

"What's going on, Dave?" Gilford said.

His first words to me in months would have brought tears to my eyes if they hadn't already been there. I turned to my best friend of thirty years with tears streaming down my face. As I gazed upon the shocked expression on the lovable gorilla's face a laugh escaped my lips.

"They see you, Gilford, they see you."

Gilford stands up slowly, watching the audience.

"Dave?"

"Gilford Monkey-Butt, you're real."

Gilford walked back and forth across the stage, watching the audience as their eyes followed him. After a few minutes the walking became dancing. I laughed as I watched my friend enjoy the moment. He finally had his wish, he was real. I turned to the crowd and watched as they enjoyed the five hundred pound gorilla just as much as I ever did.

Gilford and I spent the next few weeks rewriting the book that I had just written on my own. When it was released both of our names were on the cover.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The idea for Real was born after reading a collection of short stories by Joe Hill called 20th Century Ghosts. A story entitled Pop Art may be the best short story I have read in a long time. A story about an inflatable boy's trek through life, which I found incredibly strange and moving at the same time. I wanted to write something in a similar vein, though struggled with ideas outside the horror genre where I am most comfortable. Frustrated, I went about my other projects and forgot about it. A few months later an idea for a story about an adult whose childhood imaginary friend never went away popped into my head. I knew I had my story. An imaginary talking gorilla, I knew I had the strange part down. When I cried while writing the end of the story I knew I had achieved the emotional elements of the story as well. My literary influences include Richard Chizmar, Jonathan Stroud and the aforementioned Joe Hill.*

BIO: *Stephen Roth lives in Wichita, Kansas with his wife and three daughters. His writing has appeared in Mobius and The Enchanted File Cabinet.*