

# Pater Caninus, Ray Bradbury

Pater Caninus

Young Father Kelly edged his way into Father Gilman's office, stopped, turned, and looked as if he might go back out, and then turned back again.

Father Gilman looked up from his papers and said, 'Father Kelly, is there a problem?'

'I'm not quite sure,' said Father Kelly.

Father Gilman said, 'Well, are you coming or going? Please, come in, and sit.'

Father Kelly slowly inched back in and at last sat and looked at the older man.

'Well?' said Father Gilman.

'Well,' said Father Kelly. 'This is all very silly and very strange, and maybe I shouldn't bring it up at all.'

Here he stopped. Father Gilman waited.

'It has to do with that dog, Father.'

'What dog?'

'You know, the one here in the hospital. Every Tuesday and Thursday there's that dog with the red bandanna that makes the rounds with Father Riordan, patrolling the first and second floors—around, up, down, in and out. The patients love that dog. It makes them happy.'

'Ah, yes, I know the dog you mean,' said Father Gilman. 'What a gift it is to have animals like that in the hospital. But what is troubling you about this particular dog?'

‘Well,’ said Father Kelly. ‘Do you have a few minutes to come watch that dog, because he’s doing something very peculiar right now.’

‘Peculiar? How?’

‘Well, Father,’ said Father Kelly, ‘the dog has come back to the hospital twice this week already—on his own—and he’s here again now.’

‘Father Riordan isn’t with him?’

‘No, Father. That’s what I’m trying to get at. The dog is making his rounds, all on his own, without Father Riordan telling him where to go.’

Father Gilman chuckled. ‘Is that all? Clearly, he’s just a very smart dog. Like the horse that used to pull the milk wagon when I was a boy—it knew exactly which houses to stop and wait at without the milkman saying a word.’

‘No, no. He’s up to something. But, I’m not sure what, so I want you to come see for yourself.’

Sighing, Father Gilman rose and said, ‘All right, let’s go look at this most peculiar beast.’

‘This way, Father,’ said Father Kelly, and led him out into the hall and up the stairs to the second floor.

‘I think he’s somewhere here now, Father,’ said Father Kelly. ‘Ah, there.’

At which moment the dog with the red bandanna trotted out of room 17 and moved on, without looking at them, into room 18.

They stood outside the door and watched the dog who was sitting by the bed and seemed to be waiting.

The patient in the bed began to speak, and as Father Gilman and Father Kelly listened, they heard the man whispering while the dog sat there patiently.

Finally, the whispering stopped and the dog reached out a paw, touched the bed, waited a moment, and then came trotting out to move on to the next room.

Father Kelly looked at Father Gilman. 'How does that strike you? What was he doing?'

'Good Lord,' said Father Gilman. 'I think the dog was—'

'What, Father?'

'I think the dog was taking confession.'

'It can't be.'

'Yes. Can't be, butis.'

The two priests stood there in the semidarkness, listening to the voice of another patient whispering. They moved toward the door and looked in the room. The dog sat there quietly as the penitent unburdened his soul.

Finally they saw the dog reach out its paw to touch the bed, then turn and trot out of the room, hardly noticing them.

The two priests stood, riveted, and then silently followed.

At the next room the dog went to sit beside the bed. After a moment the patient saw the dog and smiled and said in a faint voice, 'Oh, bless me.'

The dog sat quietly as the patient began to whisper.

They followed the dog along the hall, from room to room.

Along the way the young priest looked at the older one and noticed that Father Gilman's face was beginning to contort and grow very red indeed, until the veins stood out on his brow.

Finally the dog finished its rounds and started down the stairs.

The two priests followed.

When they got to the hospital doors, the dog was starting out into the twilight; there was no one there to greet it or lead it away.

At which moment Father Gilman suddenly exploded and cried out: 'You! You there! Dog! Don't come back, you hear?! Come back and I'll call damnation, hell, brimstone, and fire down on your head. You hear me, dog?! Go on, get out, go!'

The dog, startled, spun in a circle and bounded away.

The old priest stood there, his breathing heavy, eyes shut, and his face crimson.

Young Father Kelly gazed off into the dark.

Finally he gasped, 'Father, what have you done?!'

'Damnation,' said the older priest. 'That sinful, terrible, horrible beast!' 'Horrible, Father?' said Father Kelly. 'Didn't you hear what was said?'

'I heard,' said Father Gilman. 'Taking it on himself to forgive, to offer penance, to hear the pleas of those poor patients!'

'But, Father,' cried Father Kelly. 'Isn't that whatwedo?'

'And that's our business,' gasped Father Gilman. 'Our business alone.'

'Is that true, Father? Aren't others like us?' said Father Kelly. 'I mean, in a good marriage, isn't pillow talk in the middle of the night a kind of confession? Isn't that the way young couples forgive and go on? Isn't that somehow like us?'

'Pillow talk!' cried Father Gilman. 'Pillow talk and dogs and sinful beasts!'

'Father, he may not come back!'

'Good riddance. I'll not have such things in my hospital!'

‘My God, sir, didn’t you see? He’s a golden retriever. What a name. After an hour of listening to your penitents, to ask and forgive, wouldn’t you love to hear me call you that?’

‘Golden retriever?’

‘Yes. Think about it, Father,’ said the young priest. ‘Enough. Come. Let’s go back and see if that beast, as you call him, has done any harm.’

Father Kelly went back into the hospital. Moments later, the older priest followed. They walked along the hall and looked in the rooms at the patients in their beds. A peculiar sound of silence hung over the place.

In one room they saw a look of strange peace.

In another room they heard whispering. Father Gilman thought he caught the name Mary, though he could not be sure.

And so they roamed among the quiet rooms on this special night and as the older priest walked along he felt his skins fall away—a skin of ignorance, a layer of contempt, and then a subdermis of neglect—so that when he arrived back at his office he felt as if he had shed an invisible flesh.

Father Kelly said good night and left.

The old priest sat and covered his eyes, leaning against the desk.

After a few moments of silence, he heard a sound and looked up.

In the doorway the dog stood, waiting there quietly; it had come back on its own. The dog hardly breathed and did not whimper or bark or sigh. It came forward, very quietly, and sat across the desk from the priest.

The priest looked into that golden face and the dog looked back.

Finally the old priest said, 'Bless me, what do I call you? I can think of nothing. But bless me, please, for I have sinned.'

The priest then spoke of his arrogance and the sin of pride and all the other sins he had committed that day.

And the dog, sitting there, listened.

The End