

The Crime of the Mathematics Professor (1960)
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When the man reached the highest hill, the bells were ringing in the city below. The uneven rooftops of the houses could barely be seen. Near him was the only tree on the plain. The man was standing with a heavy sack in his hand.

His near-sighted eyes looked down below. Catholics, crawling and mingling, were going into church, and he tried to hear the scattered voices of the children playing in the square. But despite the clearness of the morning hardly a sound reached the plateau. He also saw the river which seen above seemed motionless, and he thought: it is Sunday. In the distance he saw the highest mountain with its dry slopes. It was not cold but he pulled his overcoat tighter for greater protection. Finally he placed the sack carefully on the ground. He took off his spectacles, perhaps in order to breathe more easily, because he found that clutching his spectacles in his hand he could breathe more deeply. The light beat on the lenses, which sent out sharp

signals. Without his spectacles, his eyes blinked brightly, appearing almost youthful and unfamiliar. He replaced his spectacles and became once more a middle-aged man and grabbed hold of the sack again: it was as heavy as if it were made of stone, he thought. He strained his sight in order to see the current of the river, and tilted his head trying to hear some sound: the river seemed motionless and only the harshest sound of a voice momentarily reached that height-- yes, he felt fine up here. The cool air was inhospitable for one who had lived in a warm city. The only tree on the plain swayed its branches. He watched it. He was gaining time. Until he felt that there was no need to wait any longer.

And meantime he kept watch. His spectacles certainly bothered him because he removed them again, sighed deeply, and put them in his pocket. He opened his sack and peered inside. Then he put his scrawny hand inside and slowly drew out the dead dog. His whole being was concentrated on that vital hand and he kept his eyes tightly shut as he pulled. When he opened them, the air was clearer still and the happy bells rang out again, summoning the faithful to the solace of punishment.

The unknown dog lay exposed.

He now set to work methodically. He grabbed the rigid black dog and laid it on a shallow piece of ground. But, as if he had already achieved a great deal, he put on his spectacles, sat down beside the dog's carcass, and began to contemplate the landscape.

He saw quite clearly, and with a certain sense of futility, the deserted plain. But he accurately observed that when seated he could no longer see the minute city below. He sighed again. Rummaging in his sack, he drew out a spade and started thinking about the spot he would choose. Perhaps below the tree. He surprised himself, reflecting that he would bury this dog beneath the tree. But



Rio de Janeiro as seen from above (1950s)

if it were the other, the real dog, he would bury it in fact where he himself would like to be buried were he dead: in the very center of the plateau, facing the sun with empty eyes. Then, since the unknown dog was, in fact, a substitute for the "other one," he decided that the former, for the greater perfection of the act, should receive exactly the same treatment as the latter would have received. There was no confusion in the man's mind. He understood himself with cold deliberation and without any loose threads.

Soon, in an excess of scruples, he was absorbed in trying to determine accurately the center of the plateau. It was not easy because the only tree rose on one side, and by accepting it as a false center, it divided the plain asymmetrically. Confronted with this difficulty, the man admitted, "It was unnecessary to bury in the center. I should also bury the other, let us say, right here, where I am standing at this very moment." It was a question of bestowing on the event the inevitability of chance, the mark of an external and evident occurrence-- on the same plane as the children in the square and the Catholics entering church-- it was a question of making the fact as visible as possible on the surface of the world beneath the sky. It was a question of exposing oneself and of exposing a fact, and of not permitting that fact the intimate and unpunished form of a thought.

The idea of burying the dog where he was standing at that very moment caused the man to draw back with an agility which his small and singularly heavy body did not permit. Because it seemed to him that under his feet the outline of the dog's grave had been drawn.

Then he started to dig rhythmically with his spade at that very spot. At times he interrupted his work to take off and put back on his spectacles. He was sweating profusely. He did not dig deeply, but not because it-- wished to spare himself fatigue. He did not dig deeply because he clearly thought, "If the grave were for the real dog, I should only dig a shallow hole and I would bury it quite close to the surface." He felt that the dog on the surface of the earth would not lose its sensibility.

Finally he put his spade aside, gently lifted the unknown dog and placed it in the grave. What a strange face that dog had. When, with a

shock, he had discovered the dead dog on a street corner, the idea of burying it had made his heart so heavy and surprised that he had not even had eyes for that hard snout and congealed saliva. It was a strange, objective dog.

The dog was a little bigger than the hole he had excavated, and after being covered with earth it would be a barely perceptible mound of earth on the plain. This was exactly as he wanted it. He covered the dog with earth and flattened the ground with his hands, feeling its form in his palms with care and pleasure, as if he were smoothing it again and again. The dog was now merely a part of the land's appearance.

Then the man got up, shook the earth from his hands and did not look back even once at the grave. He reflected with a certain satisfaction, "I think I have done everything." He gave a deep sigh, and an innocent smile of release. Yes, he had done everything. His crime had been punished and he was free.

And now he could think freely about the real dog, something he had avoided so far. The real dog which at that very moment must be wandering bewildered through the streets of the other county, sniffing out that city where he no longer had a master.

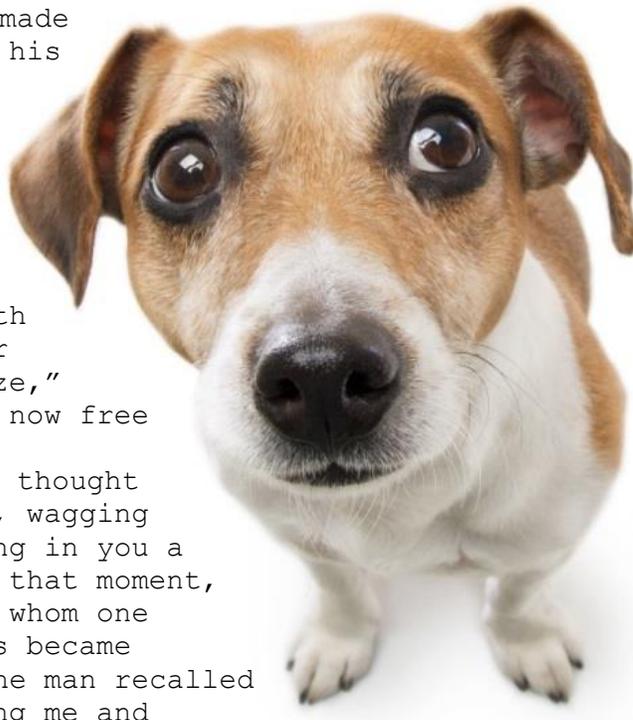
He then began to think with difficulty about the real dog as if he were trying to think with difficulty about his real life. The fact that the dog was far away in another city made his task difficult, although his yearning drew him close to the memory.

"While I made you in my image, you made me in yours," he thought, then, aided by his yearning, "I called you Joe in order to give you a name that might serve you as a soul at the same time. And you? How shall I ever know the name you gave me? How much more you loved me than I loved you," he reflected with curiosity.

"We understood each other too well, you with the human name I gave you, I with the name you gave me, and which you never pronounced except with your insistent gaze," the man thought, smiling with affection, now free to remember at will.

"I recall when you were little," he thought in amusement, "so small, cute, and frail, wagging your tail, watching me, and my discovering in you a new form of possessing my soul. But from that moment, you were already becoming each day a dog whom one could abandon. In the meantime our pranks became dangerous with so much understanding," the man recalled with satisfaction, "you finished up biting me and snarling; I ended up throwing a book at you and laughing. But who knows what that reluctant smile of mine already meant. Each day you became a dog whom one could abandon.

"And how you sniffed the streets!" the man thought, laughing a little, "indeed you did not pass a single stone without sniffing... that was the childish side to your nature. Or was that your true destiny in being a dog? And the rest merely a joke in being mine? For you were tenacious. And, calmly wagging your tail, you seemed to refuse in silence the name I had given you. Ah yes, you were tenacious. I did not want you to



eat meat so that you would not become ferocious, but one day you jumped up on the table and, among the happy shouts of the children, you grabbed the meat, and with a ferocity that does not come from eating, you watched me, silent and tenacious, with the meat in your mouth. Because, although mine, you never conceded me even a little of your past or your nature. And, troubled, I began to realize that you did not ask of me that I should yield anything of mine in order to love you, and this began to annoy me. It was on this point of the resistant reality of our two natures that you hoped we might understand each other. My ferocity and yours must not exchange themselves for sweetness; it was this which you were teaching me little by little, and it was this, too, which was becoming unbearable. In asking nothing of me, you were asking too much. Of yourself, you demanded that you should be a dog. Of me, you demanded that I should be a man. And I, I pretended as much as I could. At times, crouched on your paws before me, how you watched me! I would then look at the ceiling, I would cough, look away, examine my fingernails. But nothing moved you, and you went on watching me. Whom were you going to tell? 'Pretend,' I said to myself, 'pretend quickly that you are another, arrange a false meeting, caress him, throw him a bone,' but nothing distracted you as you watched me. What an idiot I was. I trembled with horror, when you were the innocent one: that I should turn round and suddenly show you my real face, and that I should trap you, your hairs bristling, and carry you to the door wounded forever. Oh, each day you became a dog that could be abandoned. One could choose. But you, trustfully, wagged your tail.

"Sometimes, impressed by your alertness, I succeeded in seeing in you your own anguish. Not the anguish of being a dog, which was your only possible form. But the anguish of existing in such a perfect way that it became an unbearable happiness: you would then leap and come to lick my face with a love entirely given, and a certain danger of hatred as if it were I who had revealed you to yourself through friendship. Now I am quite certain that it was not I who possessed a dog. It was you who possessed a person.

"But you possessed a person so powerful that he could choose: and then he abandoned you. With relief he abandoned you. With relief, yes, because you demanded-- with the serene and simple incomprehension of a truly heroic dog-- that I should be a man. He abandoned you with an excuse supported by everyone at home. How could I move house and baggage and children-- and on top of that a dog-- with the business of adapting to the new school and a new city, and on top of that a dog? There is no room for him anywhere,' said Martha, as practical as ever. 'He will disturb the other passengers,' my mother-in-law added, not knowing that I had already justified my decision, and the children cried, and I did not look either at them or you, Joe. But only you and I know that I abandoned you because you were the constant possibility of the crime I never committed. The possibility of my sinning which, in the pretense of my eyes, was already a sin. I then sinned at once in order to be blamed at once. And this crime replaces the greater crime which I should not have had the courage to commit," thought the man, becoming ever more lucid.

"There are so many forms of being guilty and of



losing oneself forever, and to betray oneself and not to confront oneself. I chose that of wounding a dog," the man thought. "Because I knew that this would be a minor offense and that no one goes to hell for abandoning a dog that trusted in a human. For I knew that this crime was not punishable."

Seated on the mountain top, his mathematical head was cold and intelligent. Only now did he seem to understand, in his icy awareness, that he had done something with the dog that was truly irrevocable and beyond punishment. They still had not invented a punishment for the great concealed crimes and for the deep betrayals.

A man still succeeded in being more astute than the Last Judgment. This crime was condemned by no one. Not even the Church. They are all my accomplices, Joe. I should have to knock from door to door and beg them to accuse and punish me: they would all slam the door on me with a sudden look of hostility. No one will condemn this crime of mine. Not even you, Joe, will condemn me. Powerful as I am, I need only choose to call you. Abandoned in the streets, you would come leaping to lick my face with contentment and forgiveness. I would give you my other face to kiss.

The man took off his spectacles, sighed, and put them on again. He looked at the covered grave where he had buried an unknown dog in tribute to his abandoned dog, trying, after all, to pay the debt which, disturbingly, no one was claiming-- trying to punish himself with an act of kindness and to rid himself of his crime. Like someone giving alms in order to be able to eat at last the cake which deprived the beggar of bread.

But as if Joe, the dog he had abandoned, were demanding of him much more than a lie; as if he were demanding that he, in one last effort, might prove himself a man-- and as such assume the responsibility of his crime-- he looked at the grave where he had buried his weakness and his condition.

And now, even more mathematical, he sought a way to eliminate that self-inflicted punishment. He must not be consoled. He coldly searched for a way of destroying the false burial of the unknown dog. He then bent down, and, solemn and calm, he unburied the dog with a few simple movements. The dark form of the dog at last appeared whole and unfamiliar with earth on its eyelashes, its eyes open and crystallized. And so the mathematics professor had renewed his crime forever. The man then looked around him and up to the skies, pleading for a witness to what he had done. And, as if that were still not enough, he began to descend the slopes, heading toward the intimacy of his home.