

Tapioca:

An Evil Dog

From Brother Jesse's tale, "Monk In The Cellar"

Most of the Brothers believe the monastery dog we call Tapioca to be an overly friendly retriever. I think she's the Devil incarnate. She steals my socks and constantly begs for food. Not just any food or the garbage, but the food on my plate, while I'm trying to eat it. When I finish mopping and waxing the fine wooden floor of our refectory, she'll come crashing through the door and slide across the beautiful oak boards, digging her nails in to stop herself, leaving long scratches across the new shine. She sheds hair in great fistfuls, yet never seems to go bald. In fact, she grows hair so fast she needs a haircut almost monthly. Guess who is assigned the task? Giving Tapioca a haircut is like trying to paint an unguided missile in flight. You have to get hold of her around the neck and drag her into bathroom and flop her into the tub. And if you want her to stay, you have to get in with her. To top it all off, her breath stinks. I'm reminded of it each time she wakes me up in the morning by barking in my face.

This morning I was working in the print shop and looked up from a type case to see the dog staring at me. I wondered why. We

have food out only at meal times ... beans and rice at that. So I was sure the dog wasn't expecting a morsel to be thrown her way.

Although she often wandered through the house as though she was taking attendance, she seldom came down here to see me and I suspected it was because the cellar floor was too cold for her to lie on.

A retriever can be annoying. Goldens pant almost constantly ... the vet once told me they pant in the womb ... giving Tapioca an aura of incessant need or anticipation. In short, to have anything panting and staring at you is irritating. You want to be helpful but can never figure out what she wants.

"Not dinner time yet, Tap," I said. She continued to stand and pant. All the while her eyes fixed on me, staring.

"What's bugging you, Tapioca? I don't need constant observation. Or is someone in trouble and you're trying to tell me? Bouncer get his robe stuck in the washer again?" Pant, pant, pant. In the old television show, Lassie was more mannerly. She sat breathing somewhat heavily ... but not panting ... punctuating her impatience with a gentle and occasional bark, while Timmy tried to guess which way the tornado was coming from and whether they had time for lunch.

"Tapioca," I said sternly, "weren't you taught sign language? Maybe you need to enunciate clearly. All that's coming through is your anxiety."

She briefly stopped panting to swallow.

"Maybe if you had paid more attention in puppy school ..." But she had obviously missed too many classes.

"You know, Tap, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but as senior monk around here I have to say you're really not measuring up to the accepted standards for a monastery dog." I may have seen a little distress in her eyes at that announcement.

"Now don't look dejected," I told her. "It's just that your predecessor would help

with the chores, make beds, take the garbage out, answer the phone ... simple things.”

“So what do you do? Wake me up at the wrong time, steal my food when I’m not looking, chew up my T-shirts. And you can’t even catch a ball very well! A turtle could play catch better than you! And now you can’t even talk when there is obviously a great deal on your mind. What the heck DO you do well, Tapioca?”

The dog stopped panting and hung her head. This surprised me. I always berate her for my own amusement with a cooing voice, assuming she doesn’t understand my actual words. I have no desire to make her feel bad. But she’s the only one in the house I can get away with insulting. Or so I thought.

I remembered the day Sparky, our recently deceased abbot, brought Tapioca home. The puppy was a constantly moving ball of fur. Sparky loved that dog. Come to think of it, the dog used to bark in Sparky’s face to wake him up. After he died, she began doing it to me.

I rose from my stool at the typesetting bench and grabbed a few flattened cardboard boxes stacked against a wall. While her eyes followed me, I lay the boxes flat on the floor to make an instant dog bed. Ruffling her head behind the ears, I said, “There you go, Tap,” and returned to my bench.

She stood there panting, then took three steps forward to the mat and lowered her head to sniff it. She walked completely around it while eyeing her new comfortable dog bed. Then she walked away from it and plopped down on the cold floor, closed her eyes and went almost immediately to sleep.

“If the Devil wanted to make a mess of things for us here,” I said to Kickstart (Brother Winifred) one afternoon while we were changing the brake pads on the SUV, “in what form do you think he would appear on our doorstep?”

“There is no Devil,” said Kickstart. “Fulton Sheen banished him.”

“There is evil, and you know it,” I replied.

“Yes, but no Devil,” said Kickstart.

“OK,” I said, “if there WERE a Devil.”

“As a beautiful woman,” he replied “who would tempt us and fool us and turn us all against each other and then run up credit card bills and have us paint the chapter house pink.”

“Kickstart,” I said, “you’re a misogynist.”

“No,” he replied, “I’m a bachelor.”

“I think the Devil would appear as a friendly dog,” I said.

“Tapioca colored?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I said, “but certainly friendly and panting. Following me around and jumping on my lap and getting up close to me while I eat my supper, sitting on the floor at my feet and rubbing up against my leg.

“Yes, yes” he said enthusiastically, “and she can have all the credit cards she wants!”

“No, I meant ...”

“Pink isn’t all that bad a color,” he interjected.

“Kickstart! I’m talking about the Devil appearing as a *dog!*”

“He’d never do that,” said Kickstart.

“He’d have to put up with you.”

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The Windswept Press

Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

www.windsweptpress.com