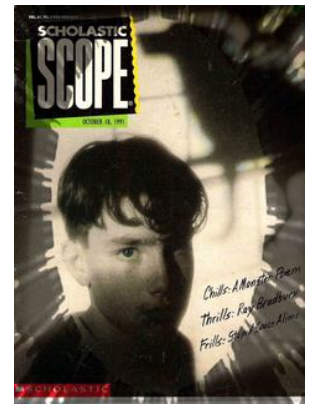


"The Emissary"

Ray Bradbury



HE knew it was autumn again, because Dog came running into the house bringing the windy cold smell of autumn with him. In every black dog-hair, he carried autumn: leaves caught in his dark ears, dropping from his white chest, and off his tail. Dog smelled just like autumn!

Martin sat up in bed and reached down with one small hand. Dog barked and showed a long length of pink, wet tongue, which he passed over and along the back of Martin's hand. Dog licked him like a lollypop. 'Because of the salt on my skin,' declared Martin, as Dog jumped up on the bed.

'Get down,' warned Martin. 'Mom doesn't like you up here.' Dog dropped his ears. 'Well. . .' Martin softened, 'just for a little while, then.'

Dog warmed Martin's small body with his dog warmth. Martin loved the clean smell of dog and the pile of colourful leaves on the blanket. He didn't really care if Mom was angry!

'What is it like outside today, Dog? Tell me.'

Lying there, Dog would tell him. Lying there, Martin would know what autumn was like; like in the old days before sickness had put him in bed. His only contact with autumn now was his dog, his leafy fur; the only hint of summer gone by — his autumn-emissary.

'Where did you go today, Dog?'

But Dog didn't have to tell him. He knew. Over a tall hill, leaving footprints in the tall hills of leaves, down to where the kids ran shouting on bikes and roller skates in the Park, that's where Dog ran, barking out his doggy delight. And down into the town where rain had fallen dark, earlier; and mud was under car wheels, down between the feet of week-end shoppers. That's where Dog went.

And wherever Dog went, then Martin could go too; because Dog would always tell him by the touch, feel, the wet, dry, or weather-smell of his coat. And, lying there holding Dog, Martin would send his mind out to run with him, to re-walk each step of Dog's way through fields, over the running creek, across the white tombstones of the graveyard, into the woods, over the meadows Martin could go now through his emissary.

Mother's voice sounded downstairs.

Her quick, angry walking came up the steps.

Martin pushed. 'Get down, Dog!'

Dog vanished under the bed just before the bedroom door opened and Mom looked in, blue eyes blinking. She carried a tray of sandwiches and fruit juice.

'Is Dog here?' she demanded.

Dog answered with a few bumps of his tail against the floor.

Mom set the tray down. 'That dog is more trouble. Always upsetting things and digging places. He was in Miss Lim-Lee's garden this morning, and dug a big hole. Miss Lee is really mad.'

'Oh...!' Martin held his breath. There was silence under the bed. Dog knew when to keep quiet.

'And it's not the first time,' said Mom. 'This is the third hole he's made this week!'

'Maybe he's *looking* for something.'

'Something? He's just too curious. He can't keep his black nose out of anything. *Always* looking!'

There was a hairy movement of tail under the bed. Mom couldn't stop smiling.

'Well,' she ended, 'if he doesn't stop digging in yards, I'll have to keep him in and not let him run.'

Martin opened his mouth wide. 'Oh, no, Mom! Don't do that! Then I wouldn't know— anything. He *tells* me.'

Mom's voice softened. 'Does he tell you, son?'

'Sure. He goes around and comes back and tells me what happens, tells me everything!'

Mom's hand was softly touching his head now. 'I'm glad he tells you. I'm glad you have him...'

They both sat a moment, thinking how boring the last year would've been without Dog. Only two more months, thought Martin, of being in bed, like the doctor said, and I'll be up again.

'Here, Dog!'

Martin locked the special collar around Dog's neck. It was a note, painted on a metal square:

'MY NAME IS DOG. WILL YOU VISIT MY OWNER, WHO IS SICK? PLEASE FOLLOW ME!'

And the sign worked! Dog carried it into the world every day.

'Will you let him out, Mom?'

'Yes, if he's good and stops his digging!'

'He'll stop; won't you, Dog?'

The dog barked.



You could hear dog barking far down the street and away, going to find visitors. Martin had fever and his eyes felt hot in his head as he sat, listening, sending his mind running along with the his dog, faster, faster. Yesterday Dog had brought Mrs. So-Seong from Jeondae Street, with a story book for a present; the day before Dog had brought Mr. Jeong-woo, the jeweller. And, sure enough, he had arrived to pay Martin a little visit.

Now, Martin heard dog returning through the warm afternoon sun, barking, running, barking again.

Footsteps came following after dog. Somebody rang the downstairs bell, softly. Mom answered the door. Voices talked.

Dog raced upstairs, jumped up on the bed. Martin looked up excitedly, his face smiling, to see who'd come to visit this time. Maybe Miss Pyong-tek or Mr. Kim-K or Miss Shin Bum-soo, or —

The visitor walked upstairs, talking to Mom. It was a young woman's voice, talking with a laugh in it.

The door opened.

Martin had company.

Four days passed and Dog did his job, reported to Martin each morning, afternoon and evening the temperatures, leaf colours, rain levels, and, most important of all, he brought visitors!

Miss Chun Chang-cheon, arrived on Saturday. She was the young, laughing, pretty school teacher with the soft brown hair and a nice way of walking. She lived in the big house on Park Street. It was her third visit in a month, because Martin could not come to school.

On Sunday it was Reverend Hoo Ha-hwang, on Monday Miss Che-bop and Mr. Hai-tekkie.

And to each of them, Martin explained about his dog. How in spring he smelled like wild-flowers and fresh earth; in summer he was baked warm, sun-crisp like bread; in autumn, now, a treasure of gold leaves hidden in his fur for Martin to explore. Dog demonstrated this for the visitors too, turning over on his back, waiting to be explored.

Then, one morning, Mom told Martin about Miss Chun, the new teacher who was so pretty and young and laughed.

She was dead.

Killed in a car accident in Moon-hwa Dong.

Martin held on to his dog, remembering Miss Chun, thinking of the way she smiled, thinking of her bright eyes, her soft chestnut hair, her quick walk, her nice stories about castles and people.

So now she was dead. She wasn't going to laugh or tell stories any more. That's all there was to it. She was dead.

'What do they do in the graveyard, Mom, under the ground?'

'Nothing.'

'You mean they just lay there?'

'You should say *Lie* there,' corrected Mom.

'*Lie* there, then, that's all. . .?'

'Yes,' said Mom, 'that's all they do.'

'That doesn't sound like much fun.'

'Oh, Martin--- it's not *supposed* to be fun.'

'But why don't they get up and walk around sometimes, if they get tired of lying there?'



'I think you've said enough, now,' said Mom.

'I just wanted to know.'

'Well, now you know.'

'Sometimes I think God's pretty silly.'

'Martin!'

Martin was silent. 'You'd think He'd treat people better than throw dirt on their faces and tell them to lay still forever. You'd think He'd find a better way. What if I told Dog to play *dead-dog*? He can do that for a little while, but then he gets bored of it and shakes his tail or blinks his eyes, or jumps off the bed, and walks around. I bet those graveyard people do the same, huh, Dog?'

Dog barked.

'That's *enough!*' said Mom, loudly. 'I don't like talk like that!'



THE AUTUMN CONTINUED. Dog ran across forests, over the creek, exploring through the graveyard as was his custom, and into town and around and back, missing nothing.

In mid-October, Dog began to act strangely. He couldn't seem to find anybody to come to visit Martin. Nobody seemed to pay attention to his sign any more. Dog came home seven days without bringing one visitor. Martin was deeply sad about it.

Mom explained. 'Everybody's so busy, that's all. People have lots to worry about besides dogs and signs.'

'Yeah,' said Martin, 'I guess so.'

But there was more to it than that. Dog had a strange look in his eyes, as if he wasn't really trying to find visitors, or didn't care, or — something. Something Martin couldn't understand. Maybe Dog was sick? Well, forget the visitors! As long as he had Dog, everything was fine.

And then one day Dog ran out, and didn't come back at all.

Martin waited quietly at first. Then— nervously. Then— anxiously.

At supper time he heard Mom and Dad call, "Dog... *here dog!*" But nothing happened. Dog didn't answer. There was no sound of his soft feet outside the house. No loud barking in the cold night air. Nothing. Dog was gone. Dog wasn't coming home— ever.

Tree leaves fell past the window. Martin lay down on his pillow, slowly, feeling a pain deep in his chest.

The world seemed dead now. There was no more *autumn* because there was no dog to bring it into the house. And there would be no winter either, because there were no dog feet to bring in the snow. No more seasons. No more time. The emissary had been lost, probably hit by a car, or lost, or stolen, and there was no more time.

Crying, Martin turned his face to his pillow. He had no contact with the world. Martin's world was dead.



In three days the Halloween pumpkins were laying, broken in garbage cans, masks were burnt in fires, the monsters and ghosts and witches were all put away until next year. Halloween was sad, unhappy, uninteresting. It had simply been another boring evening. That was all.

Martin stared at the ceiling for the first three days of November, watching sunlight and moonlight shine across it. Days got shorter, darker earlier, he could see that through his window. The trees were naked. The autumn wind was colder in temperature. But it was just an empty show outside his window, nothing more. He wasn't interested.

During the day, Martin read books about people that were all dead and gone. He listened each day, but didn't hear the one sound he *wanted* to hear.

FRIDAY night came. His parents were going out to the movies. They'd be back at eleven o'clock. Mrs. Tang T-hang, from next door, would come over for a while until Martin got sleepy, and then she would go home.

Mom and Dad kissed him good night and walked out of the house into the cool autumn air. He heard their footsteps go down the street.

Mrs. Tang came upstairs, stayed a few minutes then turned off the lights and went back across the street.

Silence, then. Martin just lay there and watched the stars moving slowly across the sky. It was a clear evening, just like when he and Dog used to run together across town, across the sleeping graveyard, across the creek, through the grass, down the green streets, chasing their dreams.

Now it was after nine o'clock.

If only Dog would come home, bringing some of the world with him--- a leaf or a flower, or just the wind in his hair. If only Dog would come home!

AND THEN, way off somewhere, there was a sound.

Martin sat up, shaking. Starlight was in his small eyes. He threw off his blankets, listening.

There, again, was the sound!

It was so small, the sound, like it was miles and miles away.

It was the dreamy sound of a dog — barking.

It was the sound of a dog coming fast across the night fields, down dark streets, the sound of a dog running and letting his breath out into the night. The sound of a dog circling and running. It came and went, the sound, it came forward and went away, as if dog was being walked on a chain by someone. As if the dog was running and somebody was walking home with him.

Martin felt hot suddenly, sweaty and excited... nervous!

The far-away barking continued for five minutes, growing louder and louder.

Dog, come home! Dog, come home! Dog, boy, ok Dog, where've you been? Oh, Dog, Dog!

Another five minutes. Nearer and nearer, and Martin kept saying the dog's name over and over again. Bad dog, bad dog, running away and leaving him alone for all these days. Bad dog, good dog, come home, oh, Dog, hurry home and tell me about the world! Tears fell onto his blankets.

Nearer now. Very near. Just up the street, barking. Dog!

Martin held his breath. The sound of dog feet in the dry leaves, down the road. And now— right outside his house, barking, barking, barking! Dog!

Barking at the door.

Martin called out. Should he run down and let dog in, or should he wait for Mom and Dad to come home? Wait, no! Yes, he *should* wait. But it would be terrible if, while he waited, dog ran away again. No--- he would go down and open the door, and his dog would jump into his arms again. Good Dog!

He started to move off the bed, when he heard a *new* sound. The door opened downstairs. Somebody was kind enough to open the door for Dog!

Dog had a visitor with him, of course. Mr. Gu Do-deok, or perhaps Miss Maing-meng.

The door opened and closed and Dog came racing upstairs, barking, up on the bed.

'Dog, where have you been, what've you done all this week?'

Martin laughed and cried all at one. He grabbed the dog and hugged him.



THEN HE STOPPED laughing and crying, stopped suddenly. He just stared at Dog with wide, surprised eyes. The *smell* coming from Dog's fur was— different.

It was a smell of dirt. Dead dirt. Dirt that smelled like unhealthy, decaying things under the ground. Stinking, stinking, smelly earth. Pieces of this awful soil fell off Dog's feet. And— something else— a small, white piece of— *skin*?

Was it skin? Was it! WAS IT!

What kind of message was this from Dog? What did it mean? The smell— the awful cemetery dirt.

Dog was a bad dog. Always digging where he shouldn't dig. Dog was a *good* dog. Always making friends so easily. Dog liked everybody. He brought them home with him.

AND NOW a new visitor was coining up the stairs. Slowly. Pulling one foot after the other, painfully, slowly, slowly, slowly coming up.

'Dog, Dog — where have you *been*!' yelled Martin.

A piece of dark dirt dropped from dog's chest.

The door to the bedroom moved in.

Martin had company...