



Toby & Me Catching Gofers

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Most children at some time or other beg for a pet, some for a dog. I did. We acquired a golden Cocker Spaniel we

named Perky. He had floppy ears that were silky to the touch and he was adorable, but the problem was that he adored my mother. I wanted a dog that would love *me*. I tried to win him over by feeding him. Which I'm sure I did—faithfully. I remember scrambling eggs for him and putting them into his bowl. A second later they had been inhaled and he trotted off to find my mother. He followed her around with adoring eyes.

Perky was excitable. He'd dash around the yard and then pant in my face as I lay in the afternoon shade of the trees. I had hoped that he'd lie down beside me in a friendly way. When we went for walks, he yanked me along at the end of the leash. I felt like a prisoner I'd seen in western movies — hands tied together with a rope attached to a wagon I stumbled behind on the way to my own hanging.

Perhaps Perky's biggest problem was that he loved to roll in whatever was on the ground that had, to a human nose, a virulent smell. We lived in a new neighbourhood at the time, and didn't have a fenced yard, so couldn't keep Perky in. Nor, I must say, did we tie him up. Our new development had encroached on what used to be ranch land, so cow and horse dung was everywhere. It was old and didn't smell at all, so we surmised that Perky ran for miles to find the freshly dropped type. We knew his return even before he scratched at the screen door, and our hearts always sank. That smell meant an afternoon scrubbing Perky. I'm not sure which of these deficiencies ended my relationship with Perky. I suspect it might have been the rolling problem. Perky was given to a good farm where he probably slept in the barn and was able to maintain the body odour he most appreciated.

One year at the end of June we moved into a new neighbourhood. I am an only child, so I had no siblings to play with through the summer holidays. And with no friends nearby, that particular summer stretched long before me. I occupied many hours playing "cut outs" from the Sears catalogue. I snipped out a large family —two sets of twins, two other children, a dog and a cat. I cut out house furniture and combined that with blocks and playing cards to make an elaborate home for my cut out family. The size of of the family indicates to me now that I wanted to be part of a much larger family, or at the very least I longed for a playmate.

Toby came into my life. He was a fat chestnut-brown Dachshund with smooth skin. In his family across the back lane from us, a new baby had just arrived. From being number one, Toby's place in the scheme of things plummeted. Even Mrs. Wiggins, his owner, the new mother, admitted that he was probably feeling very left out.

So, I was alone and on my own in the same way that Toby was.

Mrs. Wiggins asked if I'd like to take Toby for a walk. She just didn't have time because of the baby. Judging from Toby's rotund body, I felt certain that she hadn't had time for a very long time. I was happy to take him for a walk, and a little apprehensive because I didn't want to "blow it"—my big chance for responsibility and friendship. I was given instructions and we set off at a lovely slow pace. Toby never pulled on the leash. I was happy to stop wherever he needed to sniff in tufts of grass, on fire hydrants and lamp posts to monitor the comings and goings of his neighbourhood friends and foes.

But our most exciting time together was one that occurred in the vacant lot right next to my home. Toby was an unsophisticated but ardent hunter of gophers. We'd pick any one of the numerous holes on that lot. I'd sit down beside it. Toby would begin by thrusting his nose deep into the hole. He'd sniff loudly. I remember the sound of that sniff, strong and determined that came deep from his belly. Then, he'd dig furiously. The dusty earth, dry and fine, flew out behind him. His fur glistened from heat and exertion. Between vigorous digging he'd sniff into the hole again as if checking to determine whether we were making progress. Then he'd whine as a confirmation that we were definitely getting closer, or perhaps he was whining in despair. I don't know and it didn't matter. Then I'd have a go with my hand shovel. I'd dig deeper. Then back to Toby. A whole morning could thus be spent blissful and unaware of anything except the pursuit of a gopher we had never even seen. No consultation had taken place with adults about how to go about catching gophers. There was no plan and so, clearly, this activity was more about the journey and not so much about the goal. There's nothing like spending time with a friend in pursuit of a common goal, even if it's an imaginary one.

Toby's most endearing quality was that many days he would trot on his little legs to our back step. There were as yet no fences in his way. He could do this with more ease as the summer went on; all the exercise was trimming him down. Then he'd sit down, look up at our door and whine. No interpretation was needed. I had the perfect little dog for me — a summer playmate. And he loved me.