

In Loving memory of Sofie (2010–2025)

A Dog's Walk

A short story by J.C. Nesler

“Hey Sofie, do you want to take a walk?” Ben asks with excitement.

Do treats taste better than dry food? Do bunnies smell AMAZING? Of course! Of course! “Ruff, ruff!” My tail is wagging like a windmill in a hurricane, and I scamper to the front door. I run in circles to limber up, stopping with my nose facing outside, tail in full wag. I sniff the breeze coming through a crack under the entryway, lilac and lavender aromas sing to me. Spring is in the air.

Ben and I both know the routine. Leash is next. Ben is the one who feeds me, walks me, and plays with me. He’s my best friend and my human. He doesn’t live with other people, but we live with a psycho cat named Ziggy, who Ben calls my annoying little brother. His words, but I don’t dispute them.

Wait, Ben isn’t clicking the leash onto me. He always says “Okay” once we hear it click. Something must be wrong. My tail slows and I flip around to check out the situation.

Why isn’t he holding the leash? My tail stops. Always leash clicks before the front door opens.

I know the steps.

He knows the steps.

Ben is going upstairs, this is bad. Does this mean the walk is off? I bet Ziggy did something. I begin to moan. Not a bark, a low moan like I mean business. Where did you go? More moaning. I’m sure he hears me.

Ah, there he is, at the top of the stairs holding the leash above his head.

“Ruff, ruff!” I acknowledge his heroics. My tail is back to wagging with speed, it’s a blur. I run in circles at the front door to get some extra warmup. I could always use a bit more stretching. I’m fourteen years old, no longer a puppy, and for the record, I’m a short-haired dachshund mix. That’s what Ben tells people. Apparently, a test was done and I also have terrier and yellow lab as part of me. Who knew?

Ben found me at a dog pound when I was a puppy. Prior to that, I had been abandoned and left on a farm. Then I was taken to a pound. I was terrified my entire stay, but thankfully I didn’t spend much time there. All the dogs were barking in their cages except for me. I was in shock, shaking with fear. I kept peeing and pooping in my little cage and getting hosed down in a tub. Not fun.

When Ben came to the dog pound—everything changed. He kept pointing at me. At the time I had no idea what was being said, but I’ve heard Ben recount the story more than a pawful of times. As an adult dog, I have a firm grasp of human language, mainly because I’ve watched countless hours of TV. However, because of my long flat tongue, I’m unable to communicate back. So frustrating, but I work with what I have. I can make all sorts of vocalizations by sucking wind and maneuvering my mouth. It’s not all about barking. I’m like a wind instrument. Ben understands when I need or want something.

According to Ben, the staff at the pound said, “No, no, no. This dog is too damaged, she needs more time to adjust.” But Ben insisted they let him take me outside to the fenced area. So, they opened my cage and brought me outside, where I ran and played with Ben. I even peed in the grass.

His kindness had a distinct smell. It was love at first sniff. Opposite of the mean people where I was born, where their scent was rancid. I wasn’t potty trained back then, and when I made inside, they yelled and sometimes pushed my face into the pee. Then they waterboarded me to clean me off.

The staff at the dog pound was surprised by how well I was doing with Ben, so they let him take me in his car to my forever home. *My hero and savior.* I was eleven pounds at the time, twenty-four pounds now. Ben says I’m a *big* small dog.

I love Ben, and he loves me. He often tells me he loves *everything* about me. I guess that's why my nickname is 'Perfect.' I wish I could tell him how much I love him. But since I can't, I lick his face whenever I get the chance. He gets it.

"You ready for your walk, Perfect?"

Why does he always ask that same question? Can't he read emotions? I'm clearly ready. Makes no sense. I jump on him with my front legs, happily yelping. The wonderful sound of the leash clicks, a single metallic ping. "Okay!" he announces. Yes, I'm a proud Pavlovian dog.

The front door opens.

Disneyland awaits.

I jump off the cement platform that leads to the sidewalk, and the sun is shining bright with pride. Everything is perfect. Ben always lets me choose which direction I want to explore, but while I'm deciding, he yells, "Bunny!"

He's right. I smell it first, then see it. I take off toward the neighbor's yard, my four legs pumping, glad I limbered up earlier. Bunny scent is as clear as a laser light coming from its butt.

I think it just darted into a thick bush. I check a left side opening. Nothing. I take three hops and lean my head toward the ground, eating dirt. Through a tiny hole, my eyes connect with its frozen body. Forget fight-or-flight, this bunny is using the *freeze* strategy like so many of its kind. That strategy might work on some dogs, but not me. I see it, but I can't reach it. The brush is too thick. Instead, I bark like I'm possessed. I run around the bush, searching for any possible way to get in.

No chance. I'm too big. I stick my head into the bush and bark more, with no opportunity of capturing my prey—but it must think I'm a threat because it dashes off the other direction. The flight response has begun.

I follow with vigor. The chase is back on. I pull at the stupid leash; I need to catch up!

“Okay, stop pulling. I see it.” Ben let’s out more of the retractable leash, and I bolt. “Get it, Sofie!” Ben is keeping up with me, we’re on the chase together, but the bunny is too fast on the open patch. It scampers between two metallic fence poles that surround the border of our subdivision. I stop running to conserve energy, another bunny will be lurking later.

I make my way to the corner of the property, starting to think about where I want to go ‘number one’ and I notice a squirrel. I don’t give it much attention. Ben used to yell “Squirrel!” when he saw one, and I used to give chase. But I never caught one, not even close. My neighborhood is filled with trees and the squirrels can somehow climb them. I tried once, but it didn’t end well. Damn squirrels used to mock from above, screaming at me with that high-pitch chirping that only squirrels can muster. I gave up chasing squirrels years ago. I focus on rabbits. I stay in my lane.

Ben tells me I’m smart, although when I was a puppy, I did idiotic things like tear up cushions. In my defense, I didn’t understand the concept of language at the time, and I didn’t know what was expected of me. The couch seemed like a big toy.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Milo on a leash coming my way. My boyfriend. He’s pulling his walker toward me, making little barks. No time to focus on going to the bathroom. It’s Milo time.

Okay, technically Milo’s not my boyfriend, we’re not exclusive, but we’ve talked about it and I’ve agreed to our situation. Milo is popular with the ladies, so he’s not ready to settle down. Who cares about labels anyway? Gives me more freedom. But Milo is my favorite. He’s such an adorable little white poodle. He’s smaller than me and a bit younger. My type.

He gets nearer, and I get into my ‘pose.’ I’m a master at it. “Hi Milo,” I bark. My head and face are pointing forward, shoulders back, body firm, tail straight up, not wagging. I want to keep it still and play it cool, but I can’t stop my tail. It’s vibrating. He faces me and our noses almost touch.

Milo struts around me, telling me how cute my vibrating tail is (so embarrassing), and I let him smell everywhere he wants. And I mean everywhere. I get out of my pose and now it’s my turn to dance

around him. I try to remain calm, but Milo does something to me. I let out several happy barks and suddenly we're running in close circles around each other, and our leashes are tangling. It's pure bliss.

It ends when Milo's walker picks him up, unclips him, and untangles our leashes. He then re-clips Milo and puts him down farther away. He's being pulled one way, and Ben is attempting to lead me the other direction. Both Milo and I tug toward each other and bark as a show of our affection. Realizing it's a losing battle against the dreaded leash, I stop and instead walk over and smell the grass where Milo peed earlier. His scent is so masculine, filled with pheromones. I lick at his pee, and it makes me shiver with delight. Honestly, better than licking a grilled steak.

Uh-oh, here comes Kong. A huge, mean dog, half-Great Dane half-Mastiff. His bark has a distinct low-pitch, and I'm terrified of him. He could devour me for a snack. Except around Milo, and a couple other small dogs, I'm shy around dogs and people. I think I've always been cautious and non-aggressive. My first memory as a puppy was trying to get milk from mom, but I kept getting pushed out of the way by my more spirited siblings. I didn't push back. Then one day I was left on a farm, on my own, in the middle of nowhere. Petrified. I shake off the memory and start pulling at the leash, away from Kong. He lets out several more frightening woofs. Ben leads us from him. Ben protects me. Ben is perfect. "Ruff, ruff!" I yap to Ben to acknowledge his decision.

"That's right. I won't let Kong eat my Sofie dog. Nobody's eating my dog." He looks at me with a wide smile. He's trying to be funny. "Who's your daddy?"

I woof to be polite. Time for me to pee. That's the main purpose of the walk anyway, right? Well, that and poop. Fact is, I'm picky about where I go, pickier than most dogs. I have certain areas in the neighborhood where I do my business, and Ben knows the spots. When we arrive at one of the designated zones, I meander in circles, making sure no dogs or humans are nearby. I then sniff the grass, searching for an unused spot that is between two used spots, with at least one being moist. I'm very particular, other dogs seem different.

I find a suitable area, but when I flip my head, Ben is watching me. I don't like going when Ben or anyone or animal is watching me. I give a little bark, and he turns around. Now I'm ready. I get into my squat position and drain myself. Ah, much better. One last step, I need to spread the aroma by doing my *kicky* thing with my back legs. I do this so the scent gets pushed into the air and embeds into the fibers of the grass so the other dogs know I was here. It's common dog etiquette. My walk continues, and Ben is hoping I'll go number two. He likes to collect my droppings. I personally think he secretly smells my poop when I'm not looking. I begin to squat, looking at him, and Ben turns the other way. I've trained him.

False alarm. Instead, I rise and smell a bush, when a child's voice behind me sings. "Sofie! Sofie!" It's Dorena. Yay! I flip around and happily bark. She's the only kid in the neighborhood that understands how to interact with me. She's eleven years old now, and I've known her since she was a baby. I'm scared of most other kids in the subdivision, they crowd me or try to pick me up, but Dorena is sweet and gentle. "Can I walk Sofie?" she asks. "Please, please, please." Ben usually allows her, but only her.

"Okay, but just a couple minutes. We need to go soon." Dorena takes the leash and I wag my tail and lick her face.

Five minutes later, after Dorena has left to go play with her friends, Ben declares, "Time to go HOME!" Ben is smiling. That phrase has a special meaning for us. I know where home is and what home is, and Ben always lets me lead. I could be anywhere within the confines of our subdivision, and I can get us home. It took me time to learn this behavior, but now I'm a champ. I never lose my way.

As I walk past a neighbor's fence, it reminds me of an embarrassing moment that happened right here. It's regarding the first time I caught a bunny. *A trophy for any house dog.* Technically I didn't catch it, which is why it's embarrassing. It happened years ago after a long walk, and I was doing my *home* command. We noticed a group of young kids standing next to one of the backyard fences, so we stopped. The kids were talking about rabbits, and the layered fragrances wafted in the air. Multiple

bunnies. My goal in life up to that point had been to catch a bunny—which I had never done. Lots of chases, no wins.

“There’s a litter of babies on the other side of the fence,” one of the older kids said. “My mom is protecting them.” The smell was intense, I mean seriously...a group of baby bunnies. Major treats. I barked and barked because I couldn’t get through the solid white fence. I began digging under with my front paws, although I soon realized it was a lost cause and stopped. My hole was pathetic. I was way too big to fit through, and the ground was too hard.

Then it happened—the unexpected. One of the tiny bunnies must have gotten scared by my barking, and it ran under the fence through the hole I just dug. Not a smart move. The bunny and I made eye contact. It froze. We were inches away, and my mouth opened. In the next instant, the bunny literally jumped into my wide-open mouth. All the kids were watching. Ben was watching. This was my chance. The taste and smells were next level, and I was savoring the flavors and scents. Instead of me chomping down, the treat hopped out and ran away.

We were all stunned. The kids were speechless. I recall Ben saying, “Did *that* just happen?” I never expected it to jump *into* my mouth. Anyway, it’s embarrassing, I know. Later in the year I caught my first one, a triumph that played again and again in my dreams for months. I’m now up to six trophies lifetime, never easy.

As we get closer to the walkway to our home, Ben unclicks the leash as he always does, and I run to the front door unbounded. Let’s be real—I don’t *ever* need to be leashed. I know not to run at other dogs or humans, and I’ve never bitten anyone. Common dog etiquette. Ben once told me I had to be on a leash as it’s a townhouse association rule. Stupid rule, it should only apply to dumb or aggressive dogs, and all puppies, of course.

“Treat for Sofie! Good job...you’re perfect!” I always get a treat when I lead us home. Ben opens the front door, and I hop inside. Ben throws one in my general direction. He knows I prefer to hunt for

my treats. I see it fly over my head and land on the carpeting. I gallop toward the treat. “Good Sofie! I love you!”

Because I don’t have thumbs, I just pick it up with my mouth and chomp away. Treats taste so amazing. I wish Ben only fed me treats. Wait, treats plus bunny, with a dish of Milo’s pee for dessert. That would be ideal.

After my treat, I go toward my favorite resting spot in the living room, not far from Ben and the front door. It’s a dog bed next to a sliding door with windows. It’s my favorite spot because I can bark at dogs and delivery people if I’m awake, although I’m usually sleeping. I’d be a horrible guard dog.

Ziggy is parked in *my* bed, so I bark to make him go away, but he gets into a boxer’s stance and throws a jab, almost scratching me. I move back and whimper, because he has his own cat trees and beds. It’s not fair. I’m not being selfish. I know how to share my toys. “Ziggy, get out of there.” It’s Ben coming to my rescue. Ben squirts Ziggy with a water gun and Ziggy scurries away. Ben is perfect.

Time for a nap. I love naps. I bet I’ll dream about the chase we had with the bunny today.

Snoring begins.

*** The End ***

For every walk we shared together—and the ones we still walk in dreams.