

Niki and Toby

"I'm bored," barked Niki, waking up Toby who was lounging in a sunbeam.

"Take a nap, Nik" yawned Toby lazily as he stretched his short legs and arched his back.

"A nap? Are you crazy? I need adventure! I'm going to go jump the wall!"

Toby sighed heavily. "Nik, you know we aren't supposed to leave the garden."

"Oh come on Toby, it'll be fun! Let's go explore!" she said excitedly.

"I am plenty happy exploring this sunbeam at the moment, and very comfortable. Besides, you know I can't jump the wall - my legs are too short."

Toby closed his eyes and felt the warm sun on his fur.

Suddenly he felt Niki's hot breath on his ear and she whispered: "I'll bet we'll find snacks!"

Toby opened one eye. "What kind of snacks?" he said half interested.

"All kinds of snacks! Bones, and pieces of cookies, and cereal, and maybe someone to give us treats. I have been hearing kid's voices coming from a few doors down; they always leave something around, and they are always willing to share."

"Well Nik, I don't think startling children into dropping their food is considered sharing, and if they left it, that doesn't mean they aren't coming back - I think that is stealing!" replied Toby in a serious tone.

"Oh, no, it is only stealing if it comes from a store," said Niki, assuredly, "and I don't even know where one is."

"Hmmm." said Toby. All this talk about snacks was making his tummy growl.

"Come on Toby, let's go!" pleaded Niki.

"How exactly do you think I am going to get over the wall anyhow?" he asked. "I am not a jumper like you are Nik."

Niki thought for a moment.

"Well Toby, there's a place where the wall isn't so high, and if I jump over first maybe I can find something to put next to it so you won't have to jump as far," she offered.

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to go to so much trouble," he said, "but you really shouldn't go all by yourself," he continued, thinking about the treats.

Niki trotted off to see if she could find a way for Toby to get over the wall so they could start their big adventure. Toby closed his eyes and fell back into a deep sleep.

"Ohhhh Toby!" cooed Niki softly into Toby's ear.

"You found me a staircase, did you?" yawned Toby teasingly.

"Even better...a hole between the wall and the fence that you can easily squeeze through!"

"How easily?" questioned Toby, he didn't want to get his fur dirty crawling around and under a bunch of brush.

"I knew you'd ask, so I already cleared some more space, so even YOU can fit through."

"Are you saying I'm..."

"I'm not saying anything Toby, come on let's GO!"

"Oh, all right I'll come have a look, but I really don't want to have to get dirty."

Niki led the way down to the edge of the garden where the wall stopped and she disappeared into the ivy.

"Come on Toby!" cried Niki. "Follow me!"

Toby had heard those words before.

Follow me out the door that wasn't supposed to be open.

Follow me into the cupboard with the treats in it.

Follow me and get in trouble was what Toby thought, and sighed deeply. He hated for anyone to think he was dull, or not up for an adventure. He wanted to be thought of as fun and exciting, but the truth was that he didn't need to go exploring, because, everything he wanted and needed was already within his short reach.

His thinking was interrupted by Niki's shrill bark.

"Stop thinking, come on already!"

Toby shook his head and carefully stepped into the ivy. "Where are you Nik?"

"Right here...here's the spot where you can squeeze through." she said, motioning with her nose.

Toby looked but all he saw was a thin gap between the fence and the wall.

"Niki, are you serious? Have you even looked at me lately? I could barely fit my head through there let alone the rest of me. You are going to have to go by yourself this time."

He was actually kind of relieved that the space was too small. He didn't really want to go anywhere except back to his sunbeam and the comfort of his bed and bowl.

"Suit yourself" said Niki as she dashed off. Toby wandered back up the hill stopping to smell a daffodil on the path. He returned to his bed and dozed off immediately.

In his dream he was chasing a rabbit with his two brothers. He had almost gotten a hold of it when he heard his name being called and woke up to see Terri walking in.

She took care of him and Niki and he loved her more than anyone in the world. He loved the sound of her voice and the way she talked to him with silly sounds while she rubbed his belly. He loved the way she smelled, like spring flowers in bloom or cupcakes right out of the oven. She was the best at cuddling and gently scratched behind his ears just the way he liked it.

When he saw her he barked, "I'm so glad you are home, oh, I missed you so!"

She looked pleased, although he wasn't sure if she understood his exact words.

He was willing to be patient though; maybe some day she'd learn.

She looked at him and said, "Hi Toby...where's Niki?"

Toby looked toward Niki's bed, but it was empty.

"I don't know. Boy, am I glad to see you. I love you soooooo much!" Toby barked, but Terri walked past him and out into the garden.

She called for Niki. But Niki didn't come back.

"Toby...where is Niki?" asked Terri again, this time in a more serious tone.

Toby didn't want to be a tattler, but he didn't want to lie either. "She went through a space between the wall and the garden," he said, hoping she wouldn't be mad.

She looked blankly back at him.

"She left the yard...and I know you've told us not to go, and I warned her, but you know how she is, once she gets an idea, it is impossible to change her mind."

Terri asked again: "Where's Niki? Toby...where... is... Niki?"

Toby shook his head. When was she going to learn how to understand him? He was saying it as plainly as he could. She was so good at feeding him, petting him, and caring for him, but her lack comprehension was disheartening.

Toby tried another tactic. He stepped outside into the garden and stared down toward the space between the wall and the fence. Terri followed and called Niki again. He turned to look at Terri, yelped, and then returned his gaze to the wall hoping she'd understand.

Nothing. He tried it again, focusing as hard as he could. And still no Niki.

Terri went back into the house and out the front door and shut it behind her. Toby was not allowed out front unless he was accompanied by Terri, and she clearly didn't want company, so he went back to his bed.

Toby's tummy started to growl and he wandered over to his empty bowl and sniffed it. He was starting to get really hungry and grouchy and began muttering under his breath, imitating Niki's voice: "Let's go exploring," he mocked. "It'll be fun." "There will be treats." Although those treats sounded really good about now.

He wondered if maybe Niki had found a whole world of treats out beyond the yard and that was why she wasn't coming back! Maybe she found treat heaven and was lying on a big pile of deliciousness like a queen.

This kind of thinking made his tummy growl even louder and now his mouth was watering too.

Where was Terri and why wasn't she making his dinner?

Suddenly Toby felt very afraid.

What if Terri and Niki never came back and he was left alone! He tried to calm himself down but the thoughts kept coming back.

"I'll starve!" he thought.

He called for Terri but there was no answer. He called for Niki, but there was only silence. Toby started to cry. He missed his friend Niki, even though she was always getting him in trouble and didn't always share with him. He missed Terri and he wasn't sure what was going to become of him, but he was certain it wasn't good. No more cuddling, or soothing tummy rubs, no food or snacks...he whimpered softly but no one could hear him. What if something had happened to Niki...it would be his fault because he didn't go with her through the fence to protect her. He was afraid that he was going to be hungry and lonely for the rest of his life.

All of a sudden he thought he heard Niki's voice.

"Toby, what are you doing feeling sorry for yourself? Take charge! Take action!" the voice said. He looked around but it was still quiet, and he was alone.

Toby replied sadly, "but what can I do...with my short little legs and my big belly, I can't even catch a mouse to eat!"

Then Toby heard another voice inside his head, it was his father's voice.

"Toby, remember where you come from! You are a Dachshund!" his father's voice boomed.

When they were growing up, Toby's father told all the pups about their heritage and warned them not to forget their nature, even, and especially if, they lived a comfortable life.

Toby thought about the stories his father recounted about working in the fields. His father was taught to scent, chase and flush out burrow dwelling animals, which included the notoriously vicious badger!

How courageous his father was! A hard working dog; he was a tremendous athlete and a wonderful role-model. Toby felt proud to be part of his father's lineage, but he had gotten soft. He had never even seen a badger, and he let Niki do all the digging for gophers in the yard. She seemed to enjoy it, so he just cheered her on instead of getting dirty himself.

Terri was never too pleased when either of them came in dirty, but Niki didn't care. She didn't like to be cuddled as much as Toby anyhow. He tried to stay clean so she would always want to hold him and touch him.

What had happened to him? Here he was feeling sorry for himself, when he came from a line of badger hunters! He thought of his mother and saw her loving eyes. She had told him that he could do whatever he set his heart and mind to do - and if that was flushing badgers that was just fine, and if it was being a show dog, that was fine too - she loved him just the same. Thinking of her made him feel warm inside.

His mind sure was a busy place when he was hungry and alone!

"I have to do something" he thought. "I can't just wait to see what happens to me. I have to find Niki."

He knew what he had to do. He called on the support of his family and the generations before him who were courageous and focused even in the face of outstanding odds, and then he ran out into the yard and down to the space between the wall and the fence. It was darker now, but Toby didn't seem to notice. He crawled into the ivy and pushed his nose through the tight space. He drew his breath in and pushed and squeezed, and pulled with his front paws. He squirmed and wriggled and grunted and shimmied until suddenly he was through!

"Niki! Niki where are you?" he yelped. But Niki did not reply.

Toby suddenly realized he was now in a different garden, a foreign place; and so he crept forward quietly and carefully.

"Niki" he whispered.

"Nik, where are you?" Still no reply.

"Hey!" a voice startled Toby and he froze.

"Yes?" replied Toby.

"Who are you?" said the voice.

"Where are you?" replied Toby.

"I ask the questions around here, this is my domain" said the voice with authority.

"Oh, well, I beg your pardon...madam...I am, I mean, my name is Toby, and I, I, I am looking for my friend Niki" he said looking around to see who he was addressing.

"What makes you think your friend is here?"

"Well, she went through the fence, and I can still pick up her scent...I am after all a Dachshund, we have an extraordinary sense of smell," he said proudly.

"Really?" said the voice.

"I'll tell you what, I will give you free passage into the rest of the garden if you can answer this correctly. If you have such an amazing sense of smell, then what am I?" the voice teased.

Toby sniffed toward where the sound was coming from.

He could smell damp soil, and grass, and a hint of barbeque. The scent of narcissus and lemon blossom was faint but pleasing. He sniffed again and this time the smell was unmistakable.

"You are a rose" he said. "And not just any rose, I believe you are a Julia Child cultivar, and that your color is butter yellow."

The rose was speechless, but only for a moment.

"How did you know?" she asked, sounding surprised. She felt seen and appreciated, and being a rose this was so very important to her.

"Well," said Toby..."I happen to be very fond of flowers, roses especially, and also of food and good cooking, but that is not how I knew. You may or may not be aware that one of your relatives lives in our garden next door, right next to the Angel Trumpet. They are both very competitive and try to out scent each other. I am often called in to act as a judge as to who is most fragrant."

The rose was very interested in this story about a relative who lived so close and shared a competitive streak.

"So who wins?" she asked expectantly, almost certain that her kin would be victorious.

"Oh, it is always a tie, they are both so unique I couldn't possibly choose one over the other," he said casually.

"No winner?" exclaimed the rose.

"Nope, I love them equally" said Toby.

The rose was silent. She always wanted to be the best, the loveliest, the most beautiful...but it was a lonely path. The other plants and flowers often wouldn't talk with her and called her snobby and self-centered. But she was a rose, and she couldn't help thinking she was the best. Hadn't her ancestors graced the gardens of royalty throughout history? Hadn't countless poems been written about her, her lovely petals, dramatic hues, and exquisite scent? Yes she had thorns, but they were not meant to be evil. They served to protect the beauty that bloomed above them. She had always believed it was her fate to be beautiful and if that meant lonely then that was her cross to bear, and she would do it with pride.

"So, am I not the most beautiful, most wonderfully scented rose in the garden?" she said quietly. Toby stepped closer so he could see her more clearly. He thought a moment before he responded. Roses, he had learned, were exceedingly sensitive to perceived criticism and he didn't want her to feel bad.

"You are absolutely the most beautiful and wonderfully scented rose, of your kind, in this garden" he said gently.

"Really? Do you think so?" she asked.

"Without a doubt," said Toby.

"Am I even better than the Angel Trumpet?" she said sweetly.

"There's no comparison" answered Toby.

The rose was satisfied that she was the best, and couldn't perceive the subtleties of Toby's reply, but he didn't mind. He knew about roses, and knew he couldn't change them.

"If your friend is a rude, white Jack Russell terrier, she came through earlier this afternoon. She totally ignored me when I addressed her. I saw her run toward the gladiolas, but don't count on them to tell you anything, you'd think they would have a better nature with the word "glad" in their name, but I find them rather vulgar."

"I appreciate your help," said Toby, bowing his head gently. The rose giggled in delight. Toby trotted off, more confident with his surroundings having the blessings of the rose.

He stepped up toward the gladiolas to see if they might be of help, but they only teased him about his short stature. The rose was right, they weren't very sophisticated or friendly.

Toby told them he was no longer going to refer to them as glad-iolas, but instead as mad-iolas and they found this hilarious. They began chatting and laughing, and he had to bark loudly to get them to shut up.

"Have you seen my friend Niki?" he asked.

"Is she short like you?" laughed one, and the others joined in.

"Yes, she is about my height...but you know height is relative." replied Toby.

"We are the tallest bulbs in the yard and that makes us the best" said one gladiola and the others nodded in agreement.

"I guess that is one way of measuring greatness," said Toby.

"I don't really like to make comparisons though. The question is not whether you are better than any other bulb per se because of one reason or another, the question is whether you are being the best gladiola you can be. You really have only yourselves to answer to."

The gladiolas had never considered this, and looked at each other, perplexed.

"Well I guess my bottom petals are not as large as they could be," said one self-consciously.

"Oh, but your top bloom is bigger than any one of ours, it really is quite spectacular" said another in support. The first flower blushed slightly.

"You think so, really? I am really glad..." and here they all broke into laughter, "that you said so because I was feeling really insecure."

Soon the gladiolas were chatting among themselves, offering support and compliments to each other, oblivious to all the other bulbs in the yard, and whether they were taller, prettier or better than any of them.

"This is a funny garden," Toby thought, as he rounded the corner away from the now truly gladiolas.

He called again to Niki and tried to find her scent.

He saw an oak tree and decided to approach it. Oaks, he had found, were very wise and patient, and knew pretty much everything that was going on for miles around. Toby had especially enjoyed an encounter he had had with one a few years back. The oak had shared with him stories from far away places. The oak was very tall and elegant and his branches were a favorite place for birds to rest. Some of these birds travelled long distances in their migrations and the tree loved when they told him stories. He heard about snow, and being a coastal oak, he had never experienced it himself, but the birds loved to talk and so they answered all of his questions and he agreed to let them have the choice acorns and even told them where he felt itchy from termites so they could have some extra treats. The oak was happy to have the birds get the termites but he let them think he was doing them a favor so they would share more stories with him. Even though he was tall and could see a pretty good distance, he couldn't fly like the birds, or jump like the squirrels who scaled his branches. Oaks seemed to all share a profound interest in learning, especially about far away places.

"Excuse me, Mr. Oak Tree" barked Toby. The oak was silent.

"Pardon Me..." but it seemed the oak couldn't hear him.

"Try ticking his bark, right at the base of his trunk, that usually gets his attention" said a squirrel, casually.

"Tickle? With what?" asked Toby.

"Well, I use my tail of course, isn't it luxurious?" replied the squirrel.

Toby glanced at his own tail and although it was cute, was not going to be effective for tickling a tree, if he could even get close enough to its trunk.

"Oh yes, your tail is beautiful, mine is not nearly as fluffy and nikely-shaped as yours is." said Toby, hoping his flattery might entice the squirrel to help him.

"Yes, that is true." said the squirrel, knowingly.

"Will you show me, with your luxurious tail, how you tickle the oak to get his attention, I would love to watch and learn from an expert," asked Toby.

The squirrel couldn't resist an opportunity to show off his amazing tail and prowess and so he quickly jumped over to the base of the tree and swished his tail back and forth at the base of the bark.

"Thank you, Squirrel, I couldn't have done it better myself" said Toby.

"Yes, that is true," said the squirrel once more, and scurried off.

"Mr. Oak...please, sir...can you hear me?" called Toby as loud as he could.

The tree was giggling. "Who is tickling me?" he asked. "Please sir, have you seen or heard about my friend Niki? She is a little white dog, and I really need to find her."

The oak tree wanted to hear more details. He loved hearing stories.

"Well, she is very determined and agile, she loves to explore and dig in the yard. She hates rats. And she is missing!" said Toby.

The oak tree hadn't heard anything about a missing little white dog but he promised he'd ask around, but if Toby could offer a few more details about Niki's adventures, it would surely help him remember a little bit better.

So Toby thought about what kind of story might be appealing to the oak tree and decided to tell him about a day at the beach, if he in turn promised to talk to the birds that landed in his branches and find out if they knew anything about Niki's whereabouts.

"It's a deal" said the oak, and Toby knew he could trust him.

Toby began: "One afternoon, Terri, she's the person who takes care of us, took us to the beach in the car. It was just after a storm and the waves were really big, and I decided to stay safely back from the edge of the shore, but Niki, no way, she was all excited and determined to play a game of chicken with the surf. She started running back and forth, up to the edge of the water, and then back when the waves would break. She was barking and taunting the ocean and I warned her that she shouldn't do that. She just laughed and told me I had no sense of adventure. Well, that really got me upset! I believed myself to be practical and not reckless, and certainly not dull. I told her I was plenty adventurous and to prove it I went running up to the surf beside her."

The oak tree was totally consumed with the story and urged Toby to continue.

"Well, right at the point where I reached the wet sand, a huge wave came down on top of us, and we both got pulled into the water and out into the waves."

The oak tree gasped. The idea of not being able to touch the ground terrified him.

Toby continued, "I was totally panicked and afraid, but you know what, Niki was laughing! She thought it was the funniest thing ever. I was whining about being wet and cold, and fearful that I wouldn't get back to shore, that we were going to be lost at sea and drown, and she just kept laughing. Finally I got so mad that I started swimming toward her with everything I had. I was so mad I couldn't even see straight, and then all of a sudden I felt the ground beneath my feet and I was safely on the shore. She looked at me as she shook herself off, and smiled, and I felt a little embarrassed. She knew how to snap me out of my fear and make me take action, even if it included letting me be mad at her. She is a true friend."

"Wow" said the oak, "what an amazing story. Thank you...I will ask the birds to keep their eyes out for your friend, I do hope you find her. She sounds very honorable."

"Thank you Mr. Oak, I appreciate your help," replied Toby.

Toby was feeling sad after recounting his tale and missed Niki even more and now he was even more determined to find her.

His thoughts drifted home to Terri, who might be looking for him, and he tried to imagine what she would think if he and Niki were both missing.

"She might feel like I did when I found myself alone. I should probably go back and check," he thought and turned to go back toward home. He felt torn between finding his friend and returning home to Terri, so she wouldn't worry.

He saw the squirrel on the way back and said thank you again, and then strode past the gladiolas who were all smiling, then to the rose who blew him a kiss, back to the hole between the fence and the wall. This time it didn't seem as tough to get through. He still held his breath, but he seemed to slip through without a lot of effort. He quickly bounded up the steps to find Terri, when he saw a flash of white in the camellia bush.

"Niki?" he yelped, expectantly.

"At your service! Where have YOU been, Tobes? Terri has been looking for you."

"Where have I been? What are you taking about? You were the one missing!"

"What makes you think I was missing?" asked Niki.

"Because you disappeared through the fence and then Terri called and you didn't come! I started to worry too!"

"Are you saying that you went out of the yard to find me?" teased Niki.

"No, I didn't go out to find you, exactly, I was hungry and thought maybe you had found some treats."

"That's the only reason huh?"

"Well, OK, I was a little worried that you might need my help."

"Eating snacks?"

"Oh, all right Niki. I went to find you because you are my best friend, and if something happened to you, I, I...I don't think I could bare it," Toby admitted.

"So how was your adventure anyhow?" Niki wanted to know.

Toby told her about all of his encounters and she listened attentively.

"It sounds like you had a busy day!" remarked Niki.

"You know, after I went through the fence, I found a cushion in a sunbeam, and I thought about what you'd said about napping. So I climbed up onto it, and fell immediately asleep! I dreamed about these beautiful green hills and you and I were chasing rats, and digging up gophers, and chasing some other kind of animal that I have never seen before, but it had big teeth! When I woke up I ran back to talk to you about it, but when I got back you were gone!"

"Badgers? Maybe those were badgers in your dream. You know, I come from a long line of badger dogs!" said Toby, proudly.

"I am glad you are back. Life wouldn't be nearly as wonderful without you in it," said Niki gently. Toby blushed and nuzzled Niki playfully. "Me too," he said softly.

He felt so happy to be home.

Terri stepped outside and called their names and the two friends ran up together to greet her.

"Where have the two of you been? I was starting to worry!" said Terri, bending down to caress them.

The two friends just smiled, they knew she wouldn't understand their stories. Where had they been? They had switched roles completely by accident, and in doing so found something out about themselves and each other.

That night Niki climbed up on the bed next to Toby and let Terri rub her belly too.