

Juiced

By Katie Herrmann

Waukesha Reads ~ The Big Read Flash Fiction Contest
Adult Division Runner-up

The spaniel's mind was like a lightning storm, simultaneously taking in swarms of different sensory clues: leaves whipped haphazardly past her peripheral while pheromones bounced in and out of her path, all input that she was unable to decipher at the fast pace in which she was traveling. The distant bellows of some southbound geese only complicated matters by further jarring her concentration. In a flash, while still swiftly striding, her head inclined upward and to the right, just long enough to confirm what her ears had perceived. Then without warning, her head jerked back toward the earth as she abruptly yanked her owner off the path and into the woods.

"No! Heel!" demanded her loyal, yet very much exasperated companion. She was already annoyed by the dog's entrance into this trance that she seemed to remain in for nearly *every single second* of their daily walks. Although very patient, the spaniel's owner knew she would never quite understand – or be able to control – this dog. Or maybe it was the breed? While technically a hunting dog, this was a family pet who had never been encouraged to pursue prey. Yet her actions suggested that she was previously a member of some canine SWAT team, always on the alert and ready for ambush. This was a dog who took her walks seriously: no living or moving matter went unnoticed when the spaniel traversed its path.

Her companion had never before observed a dog with such relentless drive. It was as if the dog was solar-powered, her supple body having been charged all afternoon as she lazed in the sunshine, and this was her time to release the energy running through her lithe, 38-pound body. Unfortunately for her owner, no amount of obedience training could pull her out of these temporary raptures. She had just learned to live with it, and tried instead to find some enjoyment in these daily walks, in spite of the spaniel's slapdash agility.

And then, like a patrol car pursuing a high-speed chase, the spaniel frantically took off after a runaway leaf that was caught in the blustery autumn wind, nearly wrenching her owner's arm out of its socket in the process.

"Heel!" her owner hollered again, but it didn't matter. The spaniel had already realized her fault, and her focus went back to searching for animate objects; she was preoccupied and had no time for humiliation. Clearly, her companion was duly frustrated with her inability to train this dog to walk calmly and obediently, yet she struggled with the notion of so unnaturally dominating another living creature. Was it right to expect a dog to behave like anything other than a dog? Would she be overthrowing nature's intentions by demanding that this animal walk properly, head aloft and in line with her owner's pace every step of the way? That's what

the trainers had instructed at obedience school, and although her walks would have been much more peaceful and pain-free that way, something in her just couldn't bear to take all of the delight out of what was so clearly the highlight of the spaniel's day. And besides, this dog was a kind, submissive, and loving companion in all other environments. Didn't she deserve some fun after an entire day cooped up in a house all by herself?

It goes without saying that her owner was a real pushover.

And then it happened. Nose to the ground, ears pricked, the spaniel's abridged stub of a tail moved like the wings of a hummingbird, buzzing and ready to take flight. She had spotted something worth spotting. Her wits piqued, she pounced, both front paws aiming for whatever tiny organic matter lay hidden in the grass. She jumped back, tail still flickering wildly. Ears up, nose back to the ground, she moved forward a few steps, clearly tracking something. Another pounce, then more canine confusion, followed by another forward chase. And then, without a sound, it appeared – an approximately three inch high, one ounce field mouse. It dashed, flipping and tripping, moving as quickly as it could amidst the tall, impeding grass. This was life or death for the mouse, but for the spaniel, who was clearly enjoying herself, this was pure fun . . .

. . . More jumping, lots more pouncing, quick little back and forth pursuits, until the spaniel made the bold move to try and dominate. She opened her jowls and scooped. -Not to hurt the mouse, clearly, but merely to throw it around like a chew toy. And that's when she took things too far. "YURRRK!" The spaniel screamed, flying backward and expelling the vermin from her mouth.

The spaniel just stood, paralyzed, while both she and her owner stared in shock as the runt landed on its hind legs, lifted its front arms high over its head, and howled. It even showed its tiny white teeth. Amused, the spaniel jumped toward the mouse one last time, when out of nowhere, a flash of pink light accompanied a deep, unfamiliar noise: VWWWOMP! VWWWOMP! Appearing in the mouse's tiny paw was what resembled a light saber. VWWWOMP! VWWWOMP!

"YURRK!" screeched the spaniel.

And then, instantly, no sooner than it had all started, the spaniel retreated, quickly, deliberately moving herself back onto the walking path as she glanced up at her owner for approval. They both looked around as if unsure of what had just happened. Head bowed down toward the ground, the spaniel took on a look of shame and headed in the direction toward home. She was very calm. Her owner followed behind, curiously. The rest of the walk was serene, giving the spaniel's companion plenty of time to process what had just happened.

It was quite simple really. The spaniel had just been juiced. Disengaged. Deactivated. By a mouse with a light saber. And surely she would need another one of those rejuvenating solar naps before she could embark on her next adventure, tomorrow afternoon, same time, same place.

