

Habits

by Paula Danes

The sun hasn't risen yet as I hunt for breakfast, sleep elusive and sorely missed. Following close behind me is my faithful Australian shepherd, Ace, somewhere between herding me and hunting for whatever scraps I drop, knowing I won't let him eat them but determined to try, anyway. Like much of my life, our interactions have become habit, like my smile as I tell him my aches and pains, my trepidations, my anticipations. He listens to me, understanding only the tone of my voice.

I remember fleetingly how my mother used to say, "You can tell a dog you hate it, but if you say it in a happy voice the dog will think you're telling it you love it." But, as I look down at my small pup's face, I recognize how comments like that can reinforce unmeant negative thoughts through repetition. Its memory reminds me of the last day my father hit me, leaving a bruise on my cheek because I hadn't cleaned a spill up fast enough. My mother had grabbed a skillet. "If you ever lay a hand on her, there won't be enough left of you in three counties for them to identify the body." Anger and violence had become one of the habits my family lived by.

My father's most common habit surfaced when he became frustrated, whether from work, his perceived inadequacies, who won a ballgame, or any unfairness he believed he suffered. As a man of habits, when hitting became forbidden he shifted to another habit—emotional torture. By the time I turned ten, he'd yell daily, "Stop being stupid! You think any man will ever want you? You're too fat and ugly for anyone to want." And, after bringing me, a skinny kid, to tears, he'd add, "I won't speak to you again until you stop crying like a baby." But, of course, he continued to repeat how pathetic I was.

What I didn't realize then was that this habit developed as a result of a pattern of behavior between my mother and him. She'd get frustrated and start complaining about him neglecting some chore or other. "Vern, you didn't fix the washer." An argument would rage. Sometimes, she'd throw things, shout, or slam doors and drawers. But, true to their habit, once my father had gotten furious, she'd stop, smile, and announce, "I need to go do the laundry," and saunter away. My father would turn his ferocity on me in a verbal tirade. "Paula, hurry up and—." When I didn't do it quickly enough, I'd become a verbal, mental, and emotional punching bag, a scapegoat unable to defend myself. It always ended with me sobbing as he told me I was useless. By the time I reached high school, I'd yell back at him through sobs, gasping for air, sinking deeper into self-disgust rather than be called a baby again until, one day, I awoke suicidal, an act I thankfully never carried through. And the habit remained intact.

Ace, sensing I'm moving into depressive memories, brings me his ball, beginning our habit, formed to help me cope with memories of other destructive habits. Life is simple for him. If something bothers you, play fetch. If something is hard work, play fetch. If you have nothing else to do, play fetch. Fetch fixes everything, or a good belly scratch. I smile down at him, tossing the ball with a quick, "boom," signaling it's his turn to fetch.

I watch him chase the ball, tiny tail wagging, and consider what his life means to mine. I'm addicted to foods—chocolate, sugar, all the yummy, not-good-for-you foods, while his fixation is to balls, whether round, football-shaped, tennis, plastic, soft-spiked, or rubber. As a good herding dog, he pulls me out of myself before I can act on the self-destructive impulse to self-soothe with food that has left me anything but thin by creating a habit for us using his own addiction.

We're quite a pair. Our personalities polar opposites, somehow our habit creates a safe haven for us both. For him, everything is in the moment. I don't need to worry about whether some recollection like my parents ridiculing me in private while being proud of me in public will create an anxiety episode. "Marie took first place in that debate tournament. We're so proud of her," my mother or father would say. But, within what should be every child's safe haven from the cold outside world they'd say anything but. That weight bears down on me even as I try to deny it, to believe I've grown past it.

Ace presses against my leg, hating the smell of cortisol released when I become stressed. Time for exercise, he reminds me, for me to honor our shared habit. Opening the back door, we head outside, he prancing, ball in his mouth like a trophy, me dragging behind, hoping to take a nap soon. The sky still dark, a shiver runs down my spine as the hair on my neck lifts. I focus on the stars, breathing carefully, noticing a satellite, a tiny speck dancing across the sky. I watch it wink at me like it has a secret and whisper a silent prayer it isn't that the fear blooming in my chest has a reason to be there.

Ace licks my hand, bringing me back to the now, one of his trained tasks to keep me from falling off the emotional ledge into an anxiety attack brought on by a smell, the touch of dew, the glint of leaves, something that reminds me of a moment, transferring its old pain to the now. Licking not having worked, Ace stands on his hind legs, putting his paws on my stomach, pressing his head against my arm. "Notice me," his movements say, "I'm here for you." I pet his head, scruffling his ears, and murmur, "Good boy, I see you. I love you, too." He gets down, panting a little, and leans into me before trotting in a circle, his acknowledgement I did a good job, too.

It's these quiet moments when the accumulation of years of fighting not to drown in despair make me wish I had gills instead of lungs. Life's speed bumps have built into one great hill, and the toll climbing it has taken becomes more obvious daily. Some days I feel oddly bereft and anchorless, while others I feel paper thin from wear. My brother says I'm not trying to see the good in life. I say I'm trying, but it's elusive.

Having suppressed my depression until my fifties, I finally started having conversations with physicians about my feelings. One suggested being angry at the lack of a safe, happy childhood to get past feeling useless during that time, but my mother's voice echoing in my mind overwrote that possibility. "Life is life. You survived it, so just get over it." I think of it more as, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." After all, she said, "If you can understand why someone is the way he is, you can live with anything." Today, given the chance, I'd tell her that's enabling abuse, and she was scarring her children by allowing it. She'd respond, "They'll survive." But, I know better from experience. The scars from that treatment can run so deep they'll spend their lives like me, trying to overcome the experiences. Other doctors have prescribed antidepressants. "This will make life easier for you," they'd say. Yet, each time I started a new prescription, after that first pill I found myself contemplating suicide. Now, I accept the good days I get, grabbing every moment of joy possible with my nanny and partner, my service dog, Ace. I thank God for our face lick, paw press, and ball throwing habits.

As Ace and I walk in the darkness, I recognize the scent of magnolias and realize they're what stood my neck hairs on end. I flash back to the hospital, my mother hooked up to tubes, dying, as the smell of magnolias wafted into her room through the hospital window. I look down at Ace, realizing once again all the happiness I'd miss without him to tear me away from the past. I bend down and scratch behind his ears, take his ball from his mouth, and toss it into the

air. He jumps, twists his body, and deftly catches it. He becomes clearer as the sun starts to rise, and I feel the chill that settles at that moment between darkness and daylight.

Ace understands quality relationships. He would've smelled my father's malice and behaved as he does whenever he senses something a bit *off* in a person—step back, reserved, cock his head to one side, and lean into me as if to say *we need to move now, mommy*. I've learned to watch his body language when my own insights feel clouded. He, a dog, isn't confused by *what ifs* and a drive to tolerate behaviors that should be intolerable. Life is simpler for him—safe and unsafe are black and white and, if a situation is unsafe when we're together, it ends with him pulling me out of it. I smile. I love the way he barks people away from us. I reach down and pat his head, feeding our own oral habit again as I take the ball from his mouth and throw it once more.

I look down as my stomach talks to me and realize I never actually ate. I call my pup to me. He trots up, carrying his now soggy tennis ball, and drops it in my hand. "Want some breakfast, boy?" I'd swear he smiles as he prances to the door, touching it with his nose to signal he wants to go in. I smile. We have so many habits, and they all bring the happiest moments in my day.

When I'm most honest with myself, I admit I never wanted to grow old alone with an oral fixation that robs me of the running I once adored or even the long walks and hikes many people my age enjoy. Right now, those are far from me, but I don't accept becoming a failed addict, victim to my memories. I want all the smiles, the moments of laughter my future can hold. To get them, I'll use our oral habit. So, like a true addict, each day I recommit to change, knowing I will never concede defeat.

Ace nudges my leg, looking up at me, dripping saliva on my sneaker. I bend down and ruffle behind his ear. “I know, sweetheart. I’m getting it now.” Reaching into the refrigerator, I pull out his food bowl, setting it on the floor. I consider how ironic it is that he’s one of the best men I’ve ever known. He licks my hand, a quick thank you, before digging into his breakfast.