

A Change in Routine | Texto Completo

Debbie had been gone for over a year, but Matthew just could not find a way to break out of his low and lost state of mind. Deep down, he knew that things weren't right, but he felt caught in a loop he could not escape. At his annual doctor visit, his physician had expressed concern at Matthew's rapid weight gain. He advised portion control, fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and exercise, but each suggestion sounded to Matthew even more impossible than the last. So now, Matthew's life was one hundred percent predictable. Every day, he followed the same routine: Morning – hit the snooze on the alarm five times, barely get out the door to be ten minutes late to work, grab a coffee and three donuts from the break room on the way to his desk, answer calls in a bored tone, flipping through his tech support scripts and following along thoughtlessly, word-for-word, on autopilot.

Afternoon – answer calls, order fast food delivery for lunch, eat his oversized portions in the back corner of the breakroom, ignore all coworkers in favor of reading social media feeds, answer more calls, look over at Jolene at the cubicle diagonally in front of him, think about how Jolene would never look over at him, answer more calls, fill out paperwork about the calls, clock out. Evening – heat up frozen foods, eat dinner, desserts, and snacks in front of the TV, fall asleep to its drone and wake up to its sudden explosions of volume, finally haul his bulk off the couch to collapse into bed, sleep until he had to start again the next day. But one morning, a strange occurrence interrupted Matthew's entire routine and set him on a different course. He arrived at work on a Monday to find a completely empty parking lot. So stuck in his routine, Matthew didn't even notice the eerie emptiness until he trudged to the front door of his office complex, pulled on the handle, and the door wouldn't budge. It was locked.

He jumped from surprise just as obviously as he would have if a person popped out from the bushes to frighten him. In disbelief, Matthew yanked on the handle three more times. When he gave up and turned around, he noticed the empty parking lot. He froze in place. Had he entered another dimension? Matthew watched a considerable amount of science fiction television. Still, he recognized that this was implausible in the real world, and so he checked his watch. It said that it was 8:10 A.M. – his normal report time for work. He looked at the horizon, slowly turning his head to take in the full effect of the strangeness of the morning. The sky was the same color it had

been when he arrived at work on Friday. There weren't as many cars whizzing by as he was used to hearing. Near the dumpster across the lot, some spilled trash rustled and he could hear it, when ordinarily he wouldn't have been able to hear such a faint noise over the traffic.

Matthew came to a sudden realization. He looked at his phone. It said 7:10 A.M. He had forgotten to reset his watch and his bedside clock to adjust for daylight savings time. His phone automatically updated, but he hadn't looked at it during his typical rush to make it to work. He was an hour early. Matthew decided to sit in his car until someone came to open the building. Then he'd make a huge show of being on time for work to make sure his boss noticed. Walking across the parking lot, he noticed that the rustling trash he'd spotted earlier was shaking around in a way that couldn't be explained by the still air. His curiosity piqued, Matthew slowly approached the back. He was expecting a rat or maybe a raccoon, but the whip-like white tail he found wagging out of a potato chip bag couldn't belong to either of those rodents.

He slowly pulled the bag off the animal to find a puppy. It had long, thin legs and soft, floppy ears. It was a male, white with brown markings. Probably a mutt with some pointer mixed in, Matthew thought, based on the pup's appearance and the angle of his head. Matthew slowly extended a hand toward the dog, but the dog wasn't nearly so cautious. He sniffed quickly, twice, and licked Matthew's hand gleefully, over and over. Matthew chuckled. It felt odd, but nice, this warmth and joy. He'd forgotten this feeling since Debbie left. He scooped up the pup, and it transferred the joyful licks to his face. Matthew said, "I'll call you Kirk." He had decided to keep the puppy without even thinking about it. "And you're going to make me late for work, again."

Matthew looked forward to going home to Kirk through the entire work day. But when he got home, he was not quite so enamored with the pup. Every trashcan in the apartment was upended and emptied, there were three puddles and one pile of poop on the floor, the fabric on the arm of the couch was wet and torn, and two of his wooden kitchen chairs had bite marks on them. Matthew angrily yelled, "Bad dog! BAD DOG!" Kirk whimpered, tucking his tail between his back legs and ducking his head, eyes wide and sorrowful. Matthew shook his head. "That's not fair. How can I be mad at that face?" He spent the next couple hours cleaning up Kirk's mess. After that, he made himself a quick sandwich for dinner, feeding Kirk lunchmeat from his

plate, and began to read about caring for a puppy on the Internet. He came up with a strategy to prevent coming home to this sort of mess every day.

Then, he and Kirk went to the pet store. They bought food, dog bowls, chew toys, treats, a leash, and a kennel. When they got home, Matthew hooked Kirk up to the leash and they went for a walk around the neighborhood. Both human and canine were panting when they got back to the apartment. Matthew spent the rest of the evening putting Kirk's kennel together and setting it up for his comfort during the following day. He collapsed into bed and set his alarm an hour earlier than usual to make sure he'd have time to walk and feed the pup before he left for work. He realized as he was falling asleep that he hadn't turned the TV on at all that day. Matthew used all his previously wasted time to train Kirk – teaching him to stay calmly in his kennel, training him to sit and stay, making sure he chewed only his own toys.

He walked Kirk every morning to help the pup burn off the energy that he would otherwise spend being destructive. One day, feeling lighter than he'd felt since Debbie left, Matthew's walk with Kirk turned into a jog. With Kirk's toothy grin next to him, it hardly seemed like exercise. Over the weeks and months, Kirk grew into a sleek, full-grown dog and Matthew slimmed down to the point that he had to buy a whole new wardrobe. Now, Matthew had a new routine. In the morning, Kirk woke Matthew with a cold nose to the face on the alarm's first chime. They jogged the neighborhood together, they ate breakfast together, and then Matthew gave Kirk a treat and a toy and guided him to his kennel. Matthew worked all morning, more attentively than he had in the past. His boss had even mentioned a possible promotion. At lunch, Matthew ran home to walk Kirk, eating a sandwich or a wrap as they strolled along.

Matthew returned to making calls for the afternoon, but occasionally took a quick break to talk with Jolene. She had a photo of a fat beagle tacked to her cubicle wall, and shortly after getting Kirk, Matthew was able to start a conversation with her about dogs. They shared stories about their canine companions, and started to form a friendship. Matthew even thought sometimes that she might be flirting with him. In the evenings, Matthew still ate dinner and watched television, but he didn't feel as hungry, and his portion sizes lessened. He also had to take at least one or two more walks for Kirk to use the restroom, adding activity to Matthew's formerly sedentary

evenings. And Matthew envisioned soon involving Jolene in some of his evenings – asking her over for dinner, cooking something she'd find impressive, and maybe walking their dogs together. Before he found Kirk scrounging for food in the garbage, none of this would have seemed possible. Somehow, this one small change had rearranged an entire life. As he settled in to sleep, Matthew practiced his intended question for the following day: "So, Jolene, Kirk and I were wondering if you and Patches might join us for dinner at my place..."