

### **A Strange Visitor (With Strangely Familiar Behavioral Patterns)**

“Why do I have to take the trash out?” Tommy demanded as he stood next to the door, full trash bag in hand. He and his older brother had been left with a list of house chores, and so far Tommy seemed to be doing all of the undesirable jobs.

“Do you want to clean the entire kitchen?” Will fired back as he folded up a pizza box. The older boy glanced up at Tommy, an eyebrow raised.

Tommy grumbled to himself about nothing ever being fair and dragged the trash bag through the door. He cringed at the clinking of glass in the bag as it fell against each of the stairs that led down to the sidewalk. Tommy then made a big show of lugging the moderately-heavy bag over his shoulder and staggering around the side of the house to where their trash can was located.

It was a quiet night; no life could be found save for a few fireflies blinking in and out of sight in the fading dusk. No cars sped past, no neighbors called out to greet Tommy, and no dogs barked at him from fenced-in backyards.

Tommy reached the trash can and unceremoniously dropped the bag onto the ground as he reached for the lid. His fingers were maybe an inch away from the handle when he heard it; a loud rustling sound that definitely should not have been coming from the half-full bin.

Tommy hesitated, then drew back his hand, opting to kick the side of the can instead. There was a strange growling noise. Tommy groaned.

“Will!” He called as he trudged back into the house. His older brother hummed in response, busy scrubbing dishes in the sink.

“Will, there’s a raccoon or a bear or something in the trash can.” He complained. Will stopped what he was doing to glance at his little brother in alarm.

“A *bear*?” He demanded.

“Okay, probably not a bear, but something’s in there! And I’m not gonna mess with it.” Tommy said, crossing his arms over his chest. Will sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Are you sure it’s not just Mr. Watson’s cat? It wouldn’t be the first time he hopped the fence.” Will pointed out. Tommy scowled.

“I’ve never heard a cat make a noise like *that* before.” He insisted.

“Fine. Grab a flashlight, I’ll catch your raccoon.” Will dried his hands on a dish towel and opened a drawer to his right. Tommy ran to his room, grabbing a flashlight from his desk and hesitating as he stared at an old bat leaning in the corner. Were raccoons violent? He had no idea.

Tommy grabbed the bat, better safe than sorry, he reasoned.

Will was already waiting outside by the time Tommy returned.

“What do you need a bat for?” He laughed and Tommy flushed a deep red.

“It could be rabid, you don’t know!” Tommy insisted, gripping his bat tighter.

“Sure, come on.” Will gestured his brother forward; it was then that Tommy noticed the oven mitts he wore on each hand.

“What do you need oven mitts for? Worried the raccoon might be on fire?” Tommy teased right back. Will rolled his eyes.

“To protect my hands, idiot. More practical than a baseball b-.”

“Shut up!”

A minute or so of bickering later, and the brothers were positioned at the trash can, ready to catch and release a raccoon.

“Right, you open the lid and I’ll grab it and take it over to the woods. You follow me with the flashlight on so I can see where I’m going.” Will explained as he leaned over the trash bin. Tommy nodded, silent for once. He was a bit excited to see a raccoon up close; he’d only ever just barely seen them making their way through the woods at the back of the house.

Tommy grabbed the lid with his hand that wasn’t holding up the flashlight and yanked it free of the rest of the can. He shined the light inside, hoping to get an early look at the animal.

What greeted him was not, in fact, a beady-eyed raccoon, but instead the strangest creature Tommy had ever seen. The thing was about the size of a raccoon, but it was bright pink in color. It had a poofy tail, sort of like a pomeranian, and paws that resembled tiny hands minus the thumbs. The thing’s face was squished, sort of like a pug’s, but it’s ears stood up straight, which was very un-puglike. Perhaps the oddest feature that the creature possessed was the set of shimmering pink wings set into its back.

“Well, that’s not Mr. Watson’s cat.” Will stated dumbfoundedly. Observant, that one.

“Or a raccoon.” Tommy added, staring at the thing in the bin.

Tommy blinked a few times, then slowly looked up at his brother. He was waiting for Will to crack up and shout “Gotcha!” or something like that. Surely this was a prank. It had to be a joke, because that had to be a stuffed animal of some kind and Will was just a jerk and-

“What-” Will was staring at the thing, as wide-eyed as Tommy.

“You’re so funny Will. Maybe go with a more realistic color next time and I’ll fall for it.” Tommy deadpanned, rolling his eyes as he set the trash can lid on the ground and turned to leave.

“I didn’t-” Will didn’t get the chance to argue as the thing in the trash can leapt upwards; it pushed off of the rim with a flap of its wings, sending itself careening in Will’s direction.

Will cried out and quickly moved out of the thing’s way. It landed on the ground where he had been standing seconds before.

“That’s not--so you’re not-” Tommy’s eyes widened even more, if that were even possible. Not a prank, then.

The creature was on the move, flapping its wings and running all at once. Flapping its wing, not wings, Tommy realized, as he noticed the plastic soda ring that was wrapped around the creature’s left wing. Said wing hung limp against the animal’s back as it tried and failed to use the pinned limb.

Whatever the thing was, it was definitely more interested in getting away from Tommy and Will than continuing to root through the trash can. It ran towards the back yard, panting loudly and making tiny whining sounds as it tried and failed to extend its left wing again and again.

“Will, its wing, we gotta-”

“Absolutely not. Get in the house, Tommy, if mom gets home and finds out I let you get eaten by a weird alien thing I’ll never see the light of day again. We are staying away from that thing and calling-”

“Calling who, Will?” Tommy demanded, stomping his foot a bit childishly, “That was the coolest thing I’ve ever seen! You wanna hide inside and call a dog catcher on a--whatever that was?”

“If it keeps us from being eaten? Yes. Come on.” Will grabbed Tommy by the back of his shirt as he started moving in the opposite direction from where the creature had gone.

“It isn’t even big enough to eat us! You’re just being a wimp!” Tommy insisted, struggling against his brother’s grip.

“It literally lunged at me!” Will almost had them at the door when Tommy finally broke free of his grip.

“It was just escaping! It ran away right after.” Tommy argued. Will pinched the bridge of his nose.

“It’s a wild animal--actually not even, it’s probably an alien or something equally weird--the point is, it’s not a stray cat or dog. You aren’t gonna track it down and make a pet out of it.”

“Says who?” Tommy challenged. Will blinked at him.

“Me, literally two seconds ago.” He replied. Tommy groaned.

“I don’t have to listen to you, just because you are an old man-”

“I’m *four* years older than you!”

“Well I am going to go find *Clementine*, you are welcome to stay here, old man.” Tommy stormed past Will before the elder could do anything about it.

“You did not just name that alien thing after an *orange*, Tommy-”

“Try and keep up, old man.” Tommy called back. Will sighed deeply and, seeing no other options, jogged to catch up with his little brother.

It only took them a few minutes to locate the--whatever it was. The thing was wedged between some bushes, and would have been hidden were it not for its poofy tail.

“What’s your genius plan?” Will crossed his arms and stared at Tommy expectantly. They stood a few yards away from the creature so as not to startle it and make it “lash out” as Will described. Tommy tapped a finger to his chin, as if deep in thought.

“I think I will try and feed him some cereal, first, see how much he likes it, then-”

“No, moron, how--hang on, you were gonna feed it *cereal*?” Tommy nodded eagerly.

“Cereal looks like pet food.” He said matter-of-factly, as if that explained anything.

“That’s--nevermind. How are you gonna catch it?” Will shook his head as a wide grin spread across his little brother’s face.

“Oh, just you wait and see.”

Ten minutes later, Will was sitting and picking at the grass beneath him while Tommy ran laps around the back yard, chasing the creature as it did everything short of leaving the area to evade him. At first, Will had been right there with Tommy to make sure the thing didn’t hurt

him, but after the first few minutes it was obvious that the creature had no intentions of hurting anyone and didn't have the means to even if it wanted to.

"You could at least *pretend* to help me." Tommy shouted, red faced as he panted and tried to catch his breath.

"Oh, right, should I go get some cereal?"

"Oh you-"

The creature whined loudly and stumbled back to the bushes it had been hiding in originally. It dove in head first, disappearing in the thick foliage.

"Well done." Will clapped a few times as Tommy stomped up to his side and collapsed on the ground.

"Do you have a better idea?" Tommy grumbled into the ground from where he lay on his stomach.

"Oh, definitely." Will replied simply. Tommy's head snapped up.

"What?"

"Well, for starters, you need to give it some space. Whatever it is, it isn't from around here. It's in a strange environment with an annoying child following it around. Of course it's going to run."

"I'm not a child!"

"-anyways, you need to let it habituate to the area and to us." Will explained, a bit more patiently than he had previously been treating the situation.

"We need to let it *what*?"

"Habituate?" Will sighed at the blank expression on his little brother's face, "It needs to get used to us." Tommy scoffed.

"I knew that."

"Right." Will rolled his eyes.

They gave the creature a few minutes to rest, then Will approached it carefully. His main goal was to get the plastic ring off of the creature's wing; then, it would be good to go back to where it came from.

Will made it much closer than Tommy had, and he would have loved to credit that to his more delicate approach, but he could tell by the creature's panting that the thing was just exhausted. Fatigue, then, rather than habituation.

The thing whined as Will approached. It wasn't comfortable around him, it was just too tired to run away as it had earlier.

"Hey little guy," Will called softly, attempting to calm the creature down.

"His name is *Clementine*!" Tommy hissed from behind him. Will aimed a kick at the boy's shins. Tommy grunted and mumbled his complaints under his breath.

"Be quiet and follow my lead." Will insisted, glancing at Tommy to ensure that his brother nodded before they continued forward.

The pair managed to sit beside the bushes without sending the creature into a panic.

"Now what?" Tommy whispered impatiently.

“Now we wait, it-”

“Clementine.”

“-Clementine has to get used to us being here.”

“But this is boring!” Will sighed; he was in for a long night.

It took less time than Will expected for the creature to habituate to their presence. The process was aided by the appearance of their neighbor’s cat, who purred contentedly as it received head scratches from Will. The cat didn’t stay long, but seeing it interact with the brothers safely seemed to interest the creature in the bushes. Tommy and Will talked quietly and calmly to each other, as though they weren’t sitting and waiting for an alien to get comfortable around them.

The creature had stopped panting and had moved so that it could watch them curiously. They pretended to pay it no mind. Slowly but surely, the creature made its way out of the bushes and sat contentedly on the ground a few feet away from them. The pink fuzzball had decided that Tommy and Will didn’t pose any threat to its safety. The brothers kept talking, but Will could see Tommy shaking with excitement. He had to admit, he was proud of his little brother for keeping it together as long as he had.

“I’ll be right back,” Tommy whispered after a little while of sitting with the creature. Will tried to ask what he was doing, but Tommy had already disappeared around the side of the house.

Will sat silently, tugging grass strands from the ground while he waited. Tommy reappeared around the side of the house, making far more noise than was necessary. Both Will and the creature glanced up at him as he approached.

“I thought you said he was inhabited to us now. Why’d he look at me like that?” Tommy frowned as he reclaimed his seat next to his brother.

“*Habituated*, and that was just an orienting response. I did the same thing, it was just a reaction to you walking over.” Will explained. Tommy’s frown lessened.

“Oh, alright.” He then turned his attention back to the fuzzy pink creature that the pair had now dedicated well over an hour of their time to.

“Brought you a little something, Clementine.” He said brightly. The creature looked up at him curiously, cocking its head to the side. Tommy dug a hand into one of his jacket’s pockets and, to Will’s horror, produced at least a handful of cereal to pile in front of the alien.

“Tommy-”

“What? He might like it!” Tommy insisted. Will pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment while he gathered his bearings. The creature leaned forward, warily sniffing the mound of tiny shapes in front of it.

“What’s wrong *now*?” Tommy sighed disappointedly.

“Flavor neophobia. That thing-”

“Clementine!”

“-has definitely never tasted *Lucky Charms* before.” Tommy still didn’t seem to get it, raising an eyebrow as he stared at his brother.

“Why would Clementine be scared of cereal?”

“Not scared, more like weary.” Will would have launched into more detail about flavor neophobia if he hadn’t been watching in horror as Tommy tugged another handful of cereal out of his other pocket and started munching on it.

“We should get that ring off while,” Will sighed, “-while *Clementine* is distracted with the food. Did you bring scissors?” Tommy, his mouth comically filled with cereal, shook his head. Will sighed again.

“You filled your jacket pockets with cereal but didn’t think to bring a pair of scissors?”

Will retrieved the scissors himself, not trusting his little brother not to return with more pockets full of cereal.

Cutting the ring off proved to be an incredibly tedious process. Will slowly got close enough to the creature to lean over it, then moved in with the scissors as carefully as he could. It was an easy cut, the positioning was just crucial. One false move and he would be cutting into the creature's wing.

The ring fell away as Will closed the scissors with a satisfying ‘snip.’ The creature immediately noticed its freed wing, quickly expanding the limb to its full length and chirping happily as it peered at Will.

Will smiled at the pink fuzz-ball.

“You’re welcome.” He laughed as the creature wedged its head under his hand.

By this point, Tommy had finished his pocket-cereal and was bored again.

“So, what now?” He glanced at Will expectantly.

“What do you mean, ‘what now?’ This whole thing was your idea!”

“You’re the one that got him all habitated!”

“Habituated--oh nevermind.” Will scratched the creature between its ears; it seemed to enjoy that quite a lot and chirped even more.

“Well, guess we have to keep him.” Tommy announced, far too eager.

“Tommy-” An ear-piercing shriek interrupted the developing argument as both brother’s covered their ears and the creature jumped, spreading its wings as it bumped into Will.

“I’m starting to think that your whole obituary theory thing is just a myth. That’s like, the eighth time you’ve been wrong.” Tommy said when the ringing in his ears had finally subsided.

“For the last time it’s *habituated*, not inhabited or habitat or *obituary*, and that was a startle response. There was a loud noise, it surprised us all, of course we all reacted.” Will decided that he was officially done trying to explain behavioral concepts to his little brother. There was no point, really.

“Forget it, the real question is what was *that*?” Will gestured towards the woods, where the sound had emanated from.

“Bird?” Tommy suggested brightly.

“No longer taking ideas. Thanks.” Will muttered as he got to his feet and started walking towards the woods. The screeching sound came again, though this time they were a bit less surprised.

“Clementine doesn’t like that noise.” Tommy noted. Will glanced back at where the pink animal was stumbling after them; it was whining and looked a bit frantic as it darted between Tommy’s legs to pass the boy.

“Maybe-” The shriek rolled through the woods again, and this time, their little fluff-ball shrieked back. Understanding dawned in the back of Will’s mind.

“That’s--that must be Clementine’s family.” He explained quickly. Tommy frowned.

“I thought we were adopting him.” He pouted.

“We were *not* going to-” There was more shrieking from the unseen presumed alien and the pink pom-pom that had taken over the brother’s evening plans.

They made it into a clearing less than a minute later. Several shocking things greeted them.

For starters, there was the giant pink creature standing on the other side. The thing looked like Clementine, just clearly a more grown up version. It was less fuzzy, and less cute, Tommy would declare later.

The other strange thing in the clearing was the thing hovering in the air near the adult puff-ball. It was a sparking purple tear in the air, for lack of a better description. Whatever it was, it must have been where the pink creatures had come from.

Speaking of pink creatures, the giant one was snarling at the brothers. It wasn’t until Clementine came bounding between them that they realized why. The adult thought that they were trying to steal its baby.

Tommy knelt down and held a hand against Clementine’s back; the puff-ball paused, glancing up at him.

“She’s gonna take Clementine away.” Tommy whined.

“She has to, Tommy. You know we can’t keep him. He’s gotta go back to his own kind, it wouldn’t be good for him to stay with us.” Will said softly. They’d barely had the thing a few hours and Tommy was already attached. But Will was right, and Tommy knew it. Even native wild animals shouldn’t become too comfortable around humans, it certainly wouldn’t be good for an alien to do so. It would only lead to trouble for both parties down the line.

“I know but--he’s so cute.” Tommy frowned, giving Clementine a few quick head scratches.

“Yeah, and then he’s gonna grow up to look like that,” Will gestured up at the adult alien, “-you really think you have the budget to buy that many *Lucky Charms*?”

“No,” Tommy admitted. He removed his hand from Clementine’s back without another word. The fuzz-ball turned back towards the brothers and chirped once. Will smiled.

“Go on, then.” He encouraged Clementine, gesturing at the waiting parent.

Clementine darted between Tommy’s legs, rubbing up against his ankles briefly before moving on to Will. The animal jumped against Will, its paws landing on his knee. He knelt down and patted it gently on the head. With that, Clementine turned and dashed towards his family. The adult leaned down to nuzzle him, the two sparing one final glance at Tommy and Will before they vanished into the purple rift.

The bolt-shaped tear sparked again before shrinking in on itself, disappearing just like the two creatures. It was almost as if nothing had been there at all.

Tommy and Will were silent, staring in shock for a good few minutes.

“Right, well,” Will clapped his hands, drawing Tommy’s attention.

“We’ve got a house to clean and-” he checked his watch, “-just about no time to clean it.” Tommy laughed half-heartedly.

“That’s okay, we can just tell mom what happened.” He said. Will smiled.

“Yeah, I’m sure she’ll understand.” He nudged his little brother’s shoulder, “Come on.”

“Race you back?” Tommy suggested with a grin.

“You’re such a child,” Will rolled his eyes, “-but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to win.” With that, he began sprinting back the way they’d come.

“In your dreams, old man!” Tommy raced after his brother, only sparing one final glance at the clearing in which their strange friend had vanished.

### **Vocabulary Used:**

Habituation: a progressive decrease in the vigor of an elicited response that may occur with repeated presentations of the eliciting stimulus (Domjan, 2018).

e.g. Clementine becomes habituated to the humans over time.

Fatigue: a temporary decrease in behavior caused by repeated or excessive use of the muscles involved to perform the behavior (Domjan, 2018).

e.g. Clementine stops running from the brothers, but only due to exhaustion.

Orienting Response: a reaction to a novel stimulus that usually involves turning toward the source of the stimulus (Domjan, 2018).

e.g. Both Will and Clementine turn their attention to Tommy when he enters the scene.

Flavor Neophobia: an aversion caused by the unfamiliarity of the flavor of a new food (Domjan, 2018).

e.g. Clementine is weary to try the Lucky Charms that Tommy provided.

Startle Response: a sudden jump or tensing of the muscles that may occur when an unexpected stimulus is presented (Domjan, 2018).

e.g. Will, Tommy, and Clementine all jump at the loud noise that comes from the woods.



## Annotated Bibliography

Bateman, P. W., Fleming, P. A., Jones, B. C., & Rotherme, B. B. (2014). Defensive responses of gopher tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*) are influenced by risk assessment and level of habituation to humans. *Behaviour*, 151(9), 1267–1280.

<https://doi-org.proxy-sru.klnpa.org/10.1163/1568539X-00003184>

This article details an experiment in which the escape responses of gopher tortoises were studied. Tortoises in different test locations were exposed to either relatively no human activity or high levels of human activity. Their escape responses were recorded, detailing how long it took for them to reappear after retreating into their shells. Results revealed that tortoises exposed to more human activity took longer to emerge from their shells than tortoises that were exposed to relatively no human activity, though some instances of habituation to human activity did occur or would occur often in long-term conditions.

This is applicable to this artifact as the tortoises' responses were reflected in the creature's behavior at the beginning; the human contact frightened the creature as it did the tortoises. Furthermore, the creature became habituated to human activity, much like the tortoises.

Domjan, M. (2018). *The Essentials of Conditioning and Learning* 4th ed. American Psychological Association.

This text reviews concepts and examples of conditioning and learning. Definitions from this text book were utilized in defining and correctly using the Unit 1 terms throughout the story.

EDU Arctic. (2021). *Polarpedia: Wildlife habituation*.

<https://polarpedia.eu/en/wildlife-habitation/>

This website explains the specific dangers involved when wild animals become too habituated to humans and man-made buildings and structures. Wild animals that become too used to humans and what they create are left with reduced fear responses. This can lead them to approach humans and human dwellings rather than fleeing. This may not seem like a problem, but as the site explains, more contact means more conflict. These interactions will have negative impacts on both wildlife survival and human safety. This website proved useful when the ending of the story was written; the creature could habituate to its new environment but doing so wouldn't have been good for its own health or the safety of the humans it ran into.

Samuni, L., Mundry, R., Terkel, J., Zuberbühler, K., & Hobaiter, C. (2014). Socially learned habituation to human observers in wild chimpanzees. *Animal Cognition*, 17(4), 997–1005. <https://doi-org.proxy-sru.klnpa.org/10.1007/s10071-014-0731-6>

This article examines the habituation process of chimpanzees, specifically the role that social learning plays during the habituation process. Two female chimpanzees that were well-habituated to human observers were moved into a group of non-habituated chimpanzees. Results suggested that the non-habituated chimpanzees became habituated in part due to social learning from the habituated chimpanzees. This applies to the artifact in that the habituation via social learning plays a role in the story; the creature sees the humans interacting with the cat and learns to habituate to them as well.